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The Black Cat

A Short Story Magazine

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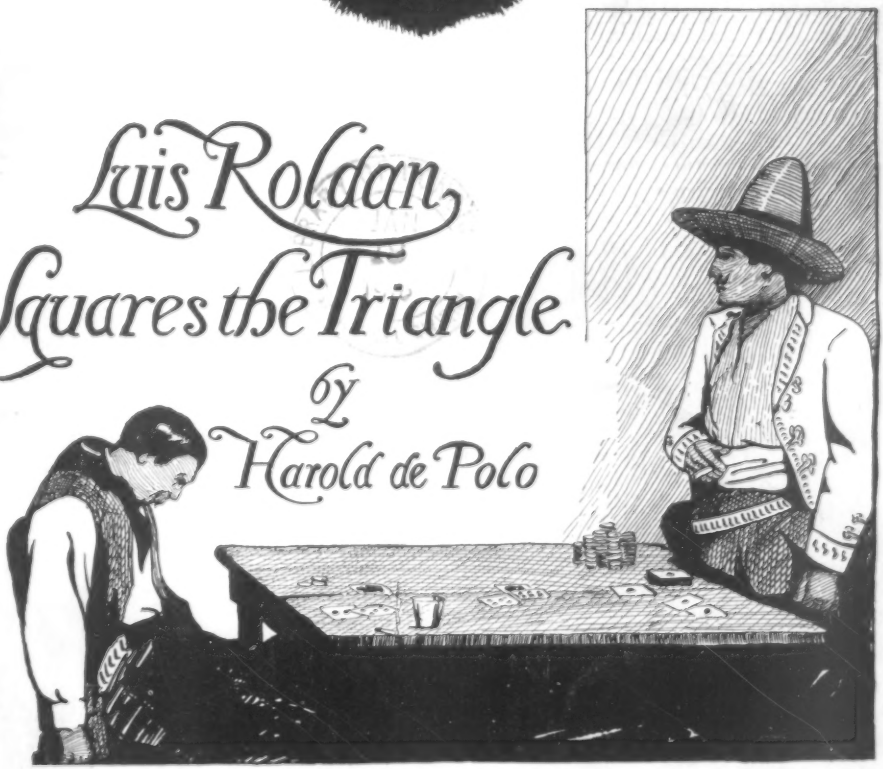
Luis Roldan Squares the Triangle

by Harold de Polo



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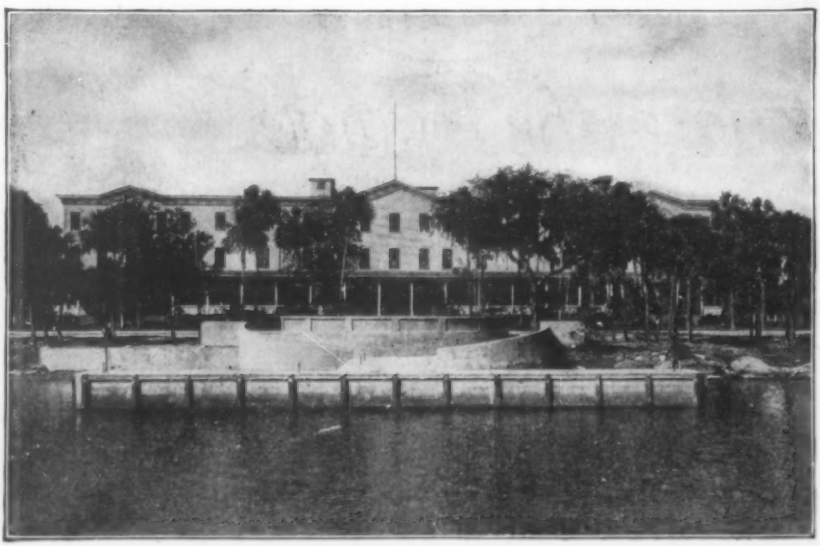

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The Black Cat

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Louis Roldan Squares the Triangle

BY HAROLD DE POLO

LOUIS ROLDAN—he whom many called **Louis the** Devil—leaned nonchalantly against the bar of the *Copa de Plata* gaming hall in the big mining camp of El Oro.

He lit a cigarette and blew out his smoke with a little sigh. "Bah; a dull world, this afternoon, no?" he commented to the bartender, his eyes straying to the long, wide room in back. The croupier sat sad and listless over his wheel; the poker tables were utterly barren; the only sign of life was at a faro table. There, simply to pass the time, the dealer was manipulating his cards to but a single, drunken, ragged *peon,* who played with only coppers for stakes.

The bartender, a chunky Irishman with a pair of shrewd eyes beneath which kindness and understanding lurked, looked up from his task of mechanically polishing and repolishing countless glasses. "Right ye are, Louis—'tis dull! Man alive, though! but haven't ye had enough action in the last week or so? Faith, ye've well-nigh stripped the camp!"

The gambler raised his brows and gave a little twitch to his silky, upturned mustache, a blasé smile crossing his handsome face. He brought out his words in a slow, precise drawl he used when speaking English.

"Exactly, my good Regan. I admit that I have had a good fortune to encounter the very harmonious combination of luck on my part and nothing more than average playing on the other. But the stakes! *Dios,* they have been small; so very small! Eh, no more has the camp the plungers who played stud with the limit their earthly possessions. You remember Grogan, eh? and old Ruggles? and—a few others? We had poker then—no, Regan?"

"Them *was* big days," agreed the Irishman musingly, "an' only a few years back, too!"

Louis shook his head sadly and clinked one golden spur against the other. "They were," he emitted quietly with a touch of whimsicality in his voice.

The bartender grinned quizzically. "The trouble with you, Louis, is that where ye just come from the playin' was probably high—damned high—eh? Lord, man, this here little game o' two dollar stud ain't so bad, ye know! Ye're spoiled, that's all!"

A light suddenly came into Louis the Devil's brown eyes, that sent them hard and chill. "Yes," he drawled softly, "I *have* played high recently—very high—the highest a man may play." He paused, shrugged his shoulders, and again changed to the smiling, debonair person he always seemed. "But that, as the eminent Mr. Kipling remarks, is another story—quite! Nevertheless, my friend, most stakes bore me lately; money alone does not thrill one suffi-

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ciently—no? There should be some motive behind it—something that either makes or breaks a man—something that settles some really vital question—something—ah, good Regan, there should be life—pulsing, throbbing, strident life! But come; another drink, please; and very mild as usual!"

Louis slowly sipped at his glass, but soon set it down as if the thing did not please him. He flicked imaginary dust from the sleeve of his soft leather *Charro* jacket, idly jangling the little golden bull-heads that adorned each seam of sleeve and trousers of his gorgeous costume. Again he clinked the golden spurs, and after that his hand unconsciously made the detour of the belt that held a heavy revolver at either hip. Once more he sampled his drink, only to put it down again at the first mouthful. He showed plainly, with more apparentness than ever before, that he was quite bored—and Louis the Devil was known as one who never allowed himself, in public, to put the trend of his mind on his face. Always he smiled, a pleasant, ironical little smile, with both lips and eyes.

Then through the front door came four Americans, flannel-shirted, khaki-trousered, heavy-booted, just off from the four o'clock shift at the Esperanza mine and dropping in for a moment before going to their quarters.

Louis glanced carelessly behind him. His smile turned his lips and he waved gracefully to the bar. "*Dios*, my dear fellows," he laughed, "come and help a poor lonely wretch to pass a few pleasant moments—no?"

Three of them gave him cordial greeting and stepped up to the bar—and none but Louis noticed that the fourth rung back as the others gave their orders.

The gambler's amused smile came to his lips and eyes. "You—you are not honouring me, Mr. Stephens?" he purred gently.

For a moment the American did not answer. Instead, he walked deliberately to the bar—the end farthest from Louis—and ordered a glass of light sherry. Then he turned and faced the gambler, his words coming slow and cold.

"Mr. Roldan, I do not drink with card sharps!" It was not meant as an insult, rather, it was but a simple statement of facts from one who had firm, settled beliefs.

One of the men swore under his breath; then all stepped back. Here was a man's fight where none must interfere. Worry came to Regan's eyes; for a fraction of a second he leaned forward, his hand unconsciously going out to stay the gambler's fire—for Louis Roldan was a fair and square man who played straight always; a man who was loved, or hated, perhaps, more than any other in Mexico. Also, it was known that no insult had ever passed unpaid by this lithe, quick-thinking, quick-acting person, who handled his weapons second to none in the country. It looked bad for young Stephens.

But Louis the Devil, did not shoot. For an instant, it is true, his mouth and eyes hardened and his face went older; but then his careless, superior, ironic smile played over his white teeth and a mocking devil leaped into his eyes.

"My dear young man," he drawled, "it is truly an estimable trait to always drink with proper people——quite estimable! Ah; always practice it, I advise you, my very good young man!"

A dull flush came to the other's cheeks. "I—I certainly will as far as you're concerned," he answered lamely, raising his head higher and looking Louis squarely in the eyes.

So they stood for a moment; the gambler, slim, graceful, handsome, utterly at ease and apparently enjoying the situation highly; the other, tall, heavy, fair, his cheeks blazing in what he deemed righteous anger against this man who had stripped the pockets of so many—for that was the only side he thought of. Roldan was cynical, experienced, well-versed with the world at its worst and at its best and always ready to laugh at the little ironies and mistakes in it. Stephens was younger, with perhaps an exaggerated idea of the ethics and cleanliness of the universe in general, due chiefly to his rather scant acquaintance with it. Had he known it better he would not have damned Louis simply because he was a lover of chance and had won; but to him it meant only one thing. Also, there are always lying stories, and he had listened. Therefore his frank words.

Neither said anything for a moment. The three Americans and Regan were looking at Louis with wide eyes. It was the first time they had ever seen or heard of an insult remaining unchallenged by him. Why, they could not tell.

It was the gambler who broke the tension. He raised his glass. His eyes were still laughing, but there was a serious touch in his voice.

"Mr. Stephens, I drink to you! May you never know—*life*!"

And Louis the Devil, quickly turned his back and was instantly telling the latest witticism that had gone the rounds of the clubs in Mexico City; while Stephens stamped from the room as the men assiduously avoided looking in his direction.

"Ah, yes, my dear fellow," Louis ended up, "there is real life down in old Mexico City. Eh, and why the devil I ever came here I cannot imagine. Bah! but the stakes are small, woefully small. I was just reminiscing with Regan as to the deplorable state of the—of the whole place in fact. *Dios*, it is quite barren of the excitement it once boasted. No more does one see the games that make or break a man; no more does one hear the ping of a gun in some little disagreement; not even does one see the numerous street knife fights every Saturday night when the *peones* become so gloriously drunk. Ah, but I tell you that El Oro has deteriorated—no?"

One of the Americans had a drink or two aboard too much—at least, that is the charitable way to look at the thing to excuse his passing scandal. "Well, Louis," he laughed with a wink, "perhaps it won't be such a hanged long time before we *do* have a nice mussy gun fight in this little town—better stick around, Louis!"

"So-o-o-o?" purred the gambler.

"*Quite* so! And our young friend, Stephens, is going to be the boy to throw lead first, *I'll* gamble!"

"How interesting," commented

Louis coolly, "how very interesting to think of my hyper-puritanical young Stephens engaged in such an affair!"

"Well, when a man's got a wife, you know, and—" Another wink.

"Yes?"

"He's pretty young; so's she! He's working on the eight to four shift; the other fellow's on the four to twelve!"

Louis was all innocence. "So-o-o?"

"Well, he's spending all his time up at the Stephens's shack—when the boy's away. Goes there directly from the mine and then goes out riding with her, sometimes. She's—she's pretty young, see? and perhaps doesn't quite realize! Also, he's a damned fascinating lady-killer who's a past master at the whole game. If I were *betting* on the thing I'd put my money on his finally winning out with her if he has just a little more time. There's a lot of talk; everyone's talking. We—we've managed to hold it back from the boy, hoping that something good might turn up, but it can't be done forever. It's bound to crop out sometime—and by then she'll probably have gone the limit and—and gun work will come in! Oh, no, Louis—stick around awhile and see the row!"

"Ah, who is the—the third party to the triangle, may I ask?" replied Louis lightly.

"Chap by the name of Severen. Englishman with—"

Louis cut in. "So-o-o-o? Ah, yes; a very tall, slim, blond fellow with steel-gray eyes and a burnished gold mustache—very charming, very polished, very courteous. Ah, yes, I believe I have met him! Why—why, yes, my dear fellow, I rather believe I shall—ah—stick around awhile!"

And there was a queer little smile that came to Louis the Devil's lips and eyes.

Louis Roldan, late that night, once more stood by the bar of the *Copa de Plata* gaming hall. He had not been playing that evening, but had come in only recently and had quietly shaken his head in the negative to all invitations. A smile was on his lips and his eyes occasionally sought the door—very frequently, during the last few moments, rather, when his timepiece had informed him that it was after twelve. The second shift was over and men usually dropped in for a bit, if only for a drink or two.

Soon the gambler heard voices outside, and his handsome face turned cold and immobile.

Two men entered—and one of them was the tall, blond, polished man of the world, Severen.

Roldan eyed him with just the least trace of scorn on his face. "Ah, my friend, it is months since we have met, no? *Dios*, one might say years! You remember at the Jocky Club in Mexico City?" He smiled tauntingly. "You—ah!—you have come for your revenge, perhaps?"

Severen lost his poise the least bit. A flush, almost unnoticeable—but noticeable nevertheless—crept into his cheeks. The tale of his last meeting with Louis was now known all over the camp—the gambler had seen to that. It was known that the Englishman had lost heavily, and it was known that he was an exceptional player.

Quickly he regained his command.

He strolled over to the bar, his hand outstretched, and very charmingly shook the gambler's. "Hello, old fellow. Deuce of a time since we've met, as you say. My word—same youthful, good-looking devil as always, eh? But have a drink, old man—do!" He smiled suavely and looked pleasantly at Louis—but underneath it all the gambler could see a restrained antipathy. It was that of the loser toward the winner.

It was said that Louis the Devil, was as smooth and agreeable as the gentleman from whom he had derived his sobriquet. Now, although he accepted the other's hand and shook it courteously, there was a mocking glint in his eyes that had suddenly gone hard. It seemed as if he might be goading the other.

"Surely, my dear fellow," he returned. "With pleasure will I drink; but after the drink, my friend, after the drink—no?" And he gazed into the crowded room behind, where men swarmed about the roulette wheel and faro layout and poker tables. "After the drink—no?" There was a decided challenge in his voice.

Severen's jaw hardened. He ordered the round. "I—really haven't been playing lately, you know," he laughed lightly, his brows rising.

"So-o-o? *Dios,* my friend, but no one plays here—bah, no one! Here I have been upwards of a week, and not a single game with the stakes to interest one. Eh, *Dios,* I was but saying to my good friend Regan, a time ago, that should my dear friend Severen but make his appearance I would then be amused. I have not seen you until now. Why, eh? Some woman—ah, my dear fellow, that is it, no? But, bah, that is of no account; and it seems that even you do not—play!"

Louis well knew that Severen would have liked to knock him down—and it was in this mood he wished to get the other man. He turned to two men alongside. "But perhaps my friend Severen is wise, for I have had phenomenal fortune lately—no?"

The Englishman stood still, his face graven; but the gambler noticed that one of his fists had clenched so that the knuckles showed white.

It was the psychological moment—and it was one of the men to whom Louis had partly spoken who turned the scales.

"Wise—wise? You can just bet on it, Louis. He wouldn't stand the chance of a paraffin dog chasin' an' asbestos cat through Hell. No, they can't buck you lately—they can't get you!"

The gambler smiled. With a little bow he turned to Severen and touched him lightly on the arm. "Perhaps you *are* wise," he said slowly, his voice very distinct, "in not being—ah—in fearing to oppose my luck, I should say!" There was insult in the words—deliberate insult.

Severen, man of the world through he was, was perhaps governed a trifle too much by the effect of public opinion. Anyway, several of the men laughed; one even made the remark that although he didn't blame the Englishman for holding back he'd always thought he'd be the one to stay with Louis; and all were looking at the two who were known to have met

before in heavy play. Another battle would be interesting—without doubt.

Severen knew this; so did Roldan. "I am afraid, my friends," purred the latter, turning, "that you will be disappointed this evening. Mr. Severen does—does not care to play. But come, another drink, *amigo!*"

Decidedly Louis was holding the stage and cheapening the other man. Men spoke in tones of praise of the gambler who was always ready to meet all comers for any stake he had in the world.

The Englishman crumpled under the strain. "Just a moment, Louis. I—I wasn't really aware, you know, that I'd said anything quite definite about not playing. I simply mentioned the fact that I hadn't done so lately—but let's have the drink first!" A ripple of talk went through the room as his gameness was spoken of.

The gambler did not flicker an eyelash. "Most assuredly," he drawled. Then, his voice louder, "My dear fellow, always have I maintained that your blood was red—and red blood wants revenge, no?"

In a moment they had finished their glasses and a table was made clear for them—for everyone at the tables was willing to give up his own game to see this second battle between the two who had played before.

Louis sat coolly, gracefully, easily, a taunting smile on his lips and in his eyes, as he sat drumming the table with his slender fingers while an attendant was after a deck of fresh cards.

Soon they were brought, and the gambler, with his customary liberality, handed the man all the silver in his pocket. "Stud. Table stakes—no?"

The Englishman was as cool as Louis; only the gambler could tell that he was not altogether at ease—the rigidity of his whole body showed that.

Louis, a shrewd judge of men, knew that his opponent was thinking of their last meeting; and it was one of his axioms that whenever a man is thinking of anything else, in a poker game, his battle is almost half lost.

They cut for deal and the Englishman won.

"Bah, Severen—how unfortunate—no? You won the deal the last time—you recollect?"

The other dealt without answering; but Louis saw that one of his hands, ever so slightly, trembled. His method of attack was formed. He must constantly remind him of their last meeting; never for a moment must he allow it to leave the other's mind.

The first hand Severen took. He had a pair of threes turned up while Louis's four open cards showed nothing. There was only a ten dollar gold piece in the pot.

"Bah," laughed the gambler, "it was not worth while bluffing—no? Anyway, my dear fellow, you will remember that at our last meeting you won the first. It is well."

The Englishman took the cash and Louis the cards. Confidence had come back a bit to the former.

When Louis had dealt, the four-faced-up cards before Severen showed a pair of nines, a ten-spot, and a trey. Louis's showed a deuce, an eight, a ten and a jack. Severen had put two gold pieces of ten *pesos* each on his cards when the second nine had come

—and the gambler had stayed.

The Englishman, now, looked long and closely at his serene opponent.

"Be careful," warned Roldan, "remember the Jockey Club. You lost the second hand—on a bluff!"

Recklessly Severen tossed fifty *pesos* into the pot.

Louis the Devil, shook his head sadly. "Ah, my friend, and you were warned! There is another little ten-spot on this covered card. Remember, you were warned. Here—your fifty, eh? How much more have you in front of you, please? Eh, two hundred and forty. Excellent. Two hundred and forty! Remember the second hand last time, though. On a bluff! But this time, I promise, it is *not* a bluff—I have been kind and warned you. Remember, you were meant to take the first and I the second—it is Fate. For my sake, let your fifty go and do not throw good gold after bad. Please, my dear fellow—please. Think of our last game—think! It is Fate, I tell you—Fate!"

Severen held himself well in hand; only a sparkle had come to his steel-grey eyes. Here was his chance to make a big thing. Louis was bluffing, he was sure—that was always his game. Why not fight him with his own weapons?

Quickly he tossed his money onto the table. "There, Louis—all the cash I have—two hundred and forty. And, if it's good, there's my note for two hundred more! Got you this time, Louis; I've another pair and you can't have more than one!"

"Your note is good for any amount, my dear Severen," replied the gambler easily. His quick eyes had noticed that the other held his body, if anything, more rigid. Had he had another pair he would not have done so—this Louis knew.

"Severen, you are foolish. I warned you in time. I have another card here that will beat you—because you do not speak the truth when you say that your covered card makes you two pair. Man—man, I know. Listen; you hold yourself too rigid; your nerves are at too high a tension. Had you another you would know you had me beaten for a certainty; and, if so, there would not be the almost undiscernible—but still discernible—glint in your eyes. Ah, no, take the advice of a more experienced man and drop out now. Here—your note for two hundred is covered—and since you play with notes, here is four hundred more, in cash, which you may cover with another I. O. U. Remember, though, our last meeting. I won the second—on a bluff; I will win this—with a higher pair!" And the gambler calmly leaned back in his chair and deftly rolled a cigarette, paying no more attention to the game than if it had been for coppers.

Nevertheless, he saw the rise and fall of Severen's chest; saw the sudden swelling of the muscles in the neck; saw the tightness with which his lips were compressed. He knew that he was right.

The Englishman counted too much on the gambler's bluffing. Hastily he tossed in his second note. He leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "What—what have you got?" His voice was a bit dry, good actor though he was. None but Louis had noticed anything out of the ordinary.

"Just enough to win, my friend—just enough!" He picked up his card and turned it facewards. "Another ten!" And without waiting for the other to show up his fifth card the gambler reached forth and carelessly brushed the gold and notes toward him.

The Englishman held together well—at least the crowd gave him credit for that. "You win, Roldan," he said, and rose.

"Naturally, my friend. But what? You are leaving now?"

"Yes, I— Until to-morrow!"

Roldan glanced at him with mocking eyes. "Listen, then: If you would be wise—never again play with me. Always I will win—*always!* I am sorry if it hurts, but I think it is for your good. Never play with me—never! You—frankly, you know not enough of the game, my friend. Stay away—stay away!"

Louis the Devil, knew his man well—he always did, in fact.

A heavy flush came to Severen's face and his jaw hardened as a ripple of laughter went through the room. He tried to speak lightly. "Thanks, Louis. See you here, though, to-morrow night, at quarter after twelve. I'll have my revenge then—and have it with interest. Good night!"

"A *very* good night," purred Louis. "Tomorrow evening—a quarter after twelve. It is well. Remember, though, I have warned you!"

But the Englishman walked straight out, saying nothing, and Louis knew that the battle was his. It was but a matter of time.

"Great stuff, Louis," laughed an onlooker.

"Yes," murmured the gambler, more to himself, "the—the triangle, I may say, is assuming a more promising form!"

A week had gone by since Louis Roldan and Severen had first met at the *Copa de Plata* gaming hall—but it was a week that had made a great change in the Englishman. Every night they had played, far into the dawn, and he had not had a single winning sitting, as Louis had tauntingly predicted. He had lost heavily; lost all his cash, lost his two polo ponies, lost his jewelry, lost, even, his salary for the next six months to come. And, as Louis had hoped, he had at last gone under beneath the strain. Drink had gripped him—and drink had gripped him with a relentless tentacle.

It was seldom indeed that he was sober. Always he was in bad condition, his face haggard, his eyes hunted, his speech uneven, his legs unsteady. It was taking toll of him with a cruel strength—and men's wives were said to be cutting him openly on the street and refusing him their homes; and Severen had been a great favourite. Of this Louis did not care; but it did interest the gambler to know that the last time the Englishman had called at the Stephens's house he had been refused admittance by the *mozo*—and Mrs. Stephens, he had learned, had been at home! He was taking his losses badly—very badly. And it was on this that the gambler had counted.

Still he had his one idea—that of beating Louis. He clung to it with an almost pathetic hope, firmly believing that he would yet triumph.

But Louis knew well that such would never be. Had it been any other, the gambler would have had some pity —for many times he had been known to turn back all his winnings and more besides. Here, though, was a case where he was fighting for what he deemed to be the ultimate good of the majority—and at the expense of one who had caused much trouble in the world, that he knew. Also, Louis Roldan was a man who had always held woman sacred!

Again Louis the Devil, stood by the bar. Always, lately, he had stood there— waiting for his prey like some relentless hawk, smiling, watchful, ever at ease.

It was close to four in the afternoon. An American left the bar and stood, for a moment, holding one of the swinging doors open while he spoke to a friend just entering. And all in a flash, through the aperture, Louis saw something which brought a pleased smile to his lips.

Severen was crossing the street from the other side, making for the *Copa de Plata* before going to the mine; young Mrs. Stephens, slim, girlish, babyishly pretty, was crossing from this side. To-day the Englishman was sober, and he raised his hat and stepped forward with all his charming gallantry. The woman, for a fraction of a second, paused; she looked at his outstretched hand, then up to his handsome face, and then very coolly turned her head and went onward! And Severen, with a suddenly blanched face, threw back his head and walked swiftly down the street without entering the bar-room.

"A drink, if you please, my good Regan," said Louis. Raising it to his lips, he sipped it slowly and then set it down. "I think," he commented, almost inaudibly, "that the—the triangle is finally squared!" So he stood, looking off into space with his eyes soft and not hearing a word that was said around him.

A slap on his back brought him from his reverie. Looking up, he saw Stephens and another alongside the bar—the former, as usual, ordering his glass of light sherry which he always took before getting home from the mine. Always he took one —light sherry—never anything else or any more.

The man with Stephens, who had slapped him in greeting, now turned about and spoke.

"Oh, say, Louis, how about that little game this evening that I spoke of—over at the club, I mean, eh?"

The gambler bowed courteously. "I am charmed, my dear fellow. But at what hour, may I ask?"

"Oh, you'd better make it about—"

But young Stephens quickly stepped in. "You hadn't better make it any hour, Mr. Roldan. I made the motion, last night, that you were not to be allowed entrance to the club—and it has been accepted. I—" He paused, his face flaming. "God, do you think you ought to be allowed to even stay in camp, especially after this last exploit of yours? Severen, I mean —poor Severen! You've broken him and ruined him—broken a fine, strong man with your—your damned cards! Broken him without the least bit of mercy—without—" Again he stopped, trying to cool his anger. Then he wet his lips and ended abruptly:

"Anyway, I don't think you'll do any more playing at the club!"

There were but few in the room; yet those few positively expected to see the young American drop to the floor at this second insult he had hurled at the gambler. Here was certainly insult—and unjust insult. All knew that Louis played fair and square and straight and with the heart of a man.

For the second time they were surprised. Louis simply stood leaning up against the bar, easily, gracefully, nonchalantly, a quizzical smile playing over his face. Neither did he say a single word, and gradually his eyes seemed to look past Stephens at something far, far away!

The onlookers felt an almost uncanny strain in the situation, and one by one they slowly left. Stephens was the last man to make his exit, and he did it with his head held high and his face blazing angrily. Still Louis stood, with his whimsical smile in his eyes that were strangely soft. Everyone wondered dumbly, puzzled to know why Stephens had been spared. None thought of cowardice on the part of Louis—that was quite idiotic. Why, then, had Stephens been allowed to say what he had?

Perhaps the only one who knew was Regan. It was he who broke the silence when the two were alone. He leaned over the bar, his eyes glowing brightly with kindness and understanding—they were even a trifle moist.

"Louis—Louis, man," he asked, his voice low, as he laid one hand gently on the gambler's arm, "why—why did ye do it? Why—why didn't ye tell the youngster? Ah, Louis, God knows I know ye and God knows I respect ye! But why, man—why did ye do it?"

A little sigh escaped the gambler. He straightened up and turned, facing Regan. His face was quite serious—perhaps more serious than any man had ever seen it— and somehow it looked much older and even a trifle bitter.

"Regan," he said softly, "it is a privilege, in this world, to see something good and clean and true; and, good Regan, it is a still greater privilege to be allowed to eliminate the thing which would spoil this same goodness and cleanness and trueness! Yes, the triangle is quite squared! But come, be good enough to tell someone to bring my animal. I am leaving town. I want other—excitement! And Regan, you will do me a favour? Kindly dispose of Severen's two polo ponies; here is also his jewelry. Give the money to some poor devils who need it—you know many and will surely do so! Here, also, are some I.O.U.'s—give them back to Severen, with the compliments of Louis the Devil! That is all, Regan, and you know I thank you! Ah, yes, that is all. Remember, though, that it is a privilege to see something good and clean and true and that it is a still greater privilege to be allowed to eliminate that which would spoil this same goodness and cleanness and trueness!"

The Invisible Claw

BY HERBERT TOLAN

ABOUT Mills's case there was something very puzzling. He seemed to add to his cough in spite of every remedy I could prescribe. Worse, he displayed a nervousness that worried me greatly.

The big, athletic, self-restrained fellow was apparently breaking down and I began to feel that all my learning was powerless to check his malady. I could not clearly diagnose his case.

A thorough physical examination failed to enlighten me. Heart, lungs, kidneys—all the important organs of bodily health—were perfectly sound. His muscular development was like that of a prize-fighter in training. Not a trace of weakness could I find, except the bronchial irritation incident to his constant colds and, of course, such minor inflammation of nose and throat membranes as might be expected.

Still, if he were not relieved, a sudden chill would likely bring on pneumonia or a pulmonary trouble which might end in consumption. These big chaps have a tendency to go that way where the feeble ones will yield to treatment.

At every visit—he had called a dozen times—the nervous peculiarities became more manifest. His eyes, formerly of remarkable steadiness, now harbored a harried restlessness, almost a dread; his lips twitched when he opened his mouth to speak and he had the habit of biting his under lip to control himself; he rubbed his hands, smoothed his trousers, tapped the floor ceaselessly with the toe of his shoes and otherwise indicated a constant state of uneasiness.

It seemed ridiculous to consider Mills a nervous patient. His symptoms must be due to that fretting which strong men indulge in when slightly "off their feed."

That was what I thought at first but, as these symptoms increased and his cough became more aggravated, I observed that he spoke of his colds as trifles and I began to wonder if any serious mental trouble afflicted him.

He was a reticent, practical, good-humored chap, with no nonsense in him, all business. He liked to talk only of his work—the manufacture of electrical supplies. Electricians are hard-headed, as a rule, their imaginations dulled by constant contact with facts and figures.

That was the reason I didn't bother about nerves. They would disappear with his cough. Then came the night when he positively leaped from his chair at the swish made by my overcoat as it slid off the lounge and I resolved to question him bluntly, for the action verged on the hysterical, in spite of his forced laugh.

"My boy," I said sharply, "in many little ways you are getting ready for an insane asylum. You haven't been

fair with me. What's the matter?"

He looked at me curiously.

"Why, these infernal colds," he answered.

"No!" I rapped. "Nerves. Come now, out with it!"

"Doctor, I haven't any nerves. You break up this cough of mine and I'll be all right."

"I'll cure it, right enough, when I know the cause. You've been dosed from the wrong end, I believe. You were ready to scream just now at nothing. Medicine isn't what you need. I want to know about the thing—well, to put it very plainly, the thing that has frightened you. Now, my lad, I'm an old man and your friend. Tell me, honestly, haven't you been coming here right along because you wanted to confide something to me when you couldn't stand it any longer?"

Mills hesitated. Finally he cleared his throat and stammered: "I've wanted to—to speak of a matter that's too confoundedly ridiculous to tell anyone. Once here, I could not bring myself to it. I hate to be laughed at."

"You won't be," I assured him.

But still he shrank from confiding in me.

"If medicine can keep me along till warm weather," he faltered, "I guess I can stand it. I'll do everything to keep in shape, Doctor. Trouble is, I don't sleep enough. You're mistaken about my being frightened. I'm not. Something queer is happening, but I won't admit being scared at it. Loss of sleep and getting cold every night pulls a chap down. If it were summer, I'd be all right."

"But summer is a good way off," I reminded him, "and you're not all right. Now that you've cracked the shell, let's have the meat of this. There's no laugh about it for me. Why don't you sleep?"

I could see the resolution gather in Mills's eyes.

"Cold," he answered, hastily. "Doctor, I can't keep the bedclothes on."

Despite the seriousness of the matter I could hardly repress a smile.

"Do you kick them off?" I asked.

"No, sir, they—they slide off! Without my moving in the least they are—removed. I've been wide awake at times and felt them drawn away from me."

I said nothing, for the simple reason that I had no comment to make.

"There's no accounting for it," Mills continued. "No one is in the room—couldn't get in easily and certainly couldn't get out for the windows are thirty feet from the ground and my door is always locked. Besides, I've been awake, I tell you. I've leaped off that bed a dozen times in the hope of getting my fingers on something tangible, only to find absolutely no clue to the mystery."

"You must work off the coverings by some unconscious muscular movement, due to cerebral activity caused by the expectation of the happening," I suggested, although I did not believe a word of it myself. The man clearly had to be soothed. "You've pushed off the clothes once or twice by that same foot action which children use who are forever wadding their blankets down to their feet—a perfectly natural proceeding, for sleep begins in the feet and they must be

warm for sound sleeping. Now, this has seemed queer to you. It got on your nerves a bit. You dropped off, thinking of it—expecting it—and you did it!"

Mills laughed derisively.

"That's rot!" he exclaimed, doggedly. "I've tucked the things in good and tight and gone to sleep as warm as the proverbial bug in the rug, snugly and comfortably, with my mind concentrated on some business problem. I make myself do that. I haven't a grain of superstition and I don't indulge in fancies, Doctor. I'm a practical man. The claw that has stripped me may be invisible, but there's a human agency behind it."

"At what hour do you retire?" I asked, to change the subject.

My patient seemed a trifle embarrassed in his reply.

"Well," he said, slowly, "not very early. I'm frank to say that I haven't cared to go to bed lately, until I had to. The earlier I turn in, the worse for me. Sometimes it's two or three o'clock in the morning before I finally lie down."

"Any enemies in your boarding house?"

"None that I know of. They're a quiet lot and I leave them alone for the most part. What do you make of it, Doctor?"

"So far, only something to be investigated," I replied, carefully. "In order to do that, I'm going to be your bedfellow, if you'll allow me, until the matter is explained. If it's *you*, I'll know it; if it's someone else, I'll get him. But no one must be aware of my presence. Not a word, not a whisper, in your room. You must conduct yourself as if entirely alone. I'll be the most silent partner you ever had."

"Good!" exclaimed Mills, heartily. "We can arrange it nicely, if you don't mind close quarters. My bed is a wide divan, a piece of my college furniture, but two can bunk in it all right."

"I see," was my response. "One of those affairs with no head or footboard. They're not bad."

The relief expressed on his face amazed me as he went on to talk in a boyish, confiding manner.

"Don't think my room is to be judged by the bed," he continued. "I've got the best one in the house—large, quiet, and well ventilated—a big corner room with a south and west exposure, two windows and a fine view. I've had it for more than four years. The house is old, but I'm pretty proud of my location and the way I've fixed things up. I'll be glad to have you see it, Doctor."

While he chatted I made a few preparations. Then, after leaving word that I should not return until morning, we started.

The night was dark and heavy with frost—a numbing bitter air pregnant with chill. On we went at a brisk pace, preferring to walk the mile as the hour was early yet for an unobserved entrance.

No one met us in the hallway or upon the stairs. A few steps along a passage on the second floor brought us to a door at the end. Mills unlocked it and we entered.

My companion lighted a couple of gas jets. Truly, the room was most attractive and excellently furnished.

Etchings and small paintings ornamented the walls. Rugs of no mean value covered the floor. Baseball and football relics lent an air of masculinity to the whole.

I nodded my appreciation as, creeping about, I carefully examined windows, closets, and such pictures as might conceal an opening. There was no transom. Everything was as tight as a box.

The chamber was thoroughly heated by a radiator-coil; there was therefore no opportunity for the entrance of anyone or anything through the register grill which one might expect to find in a house of this age.

Motioning for a little air, I handed Mills a powder, undressed, silently inspected the bedding and turned in. My companion whistled a careless tune, smoked a pipe, looked over an evening paper and killed time until the clocks struck midnight. Then he partially disrobed and swung a pair of Indian clubs for a few minutes. Lying on my back I watched his graceful movements until my eyes began to close. I winked away the drowsiness and stared at the high ceiling.

Here and there a crack ran partly across. A few spots and discolorations showed. Mills had said that the house was old and I remember wondering if the plaster would fall during the night. But it would take more than that, I knew, to waken Mills after he had swallowed the sleeping powder I had given him.

As a last act before coming to bed, Mills dissolved the powder in a little water and, turning out the gas, crept silently under the covers beside me. I felt his fingers reach for mine and I smiled at their trembling pressure.

Mills's strange story was fast losing interest for me. A few minutes more and I was fast asleep.

I awoke with a start, thinking myself on my own bed and wondering at the chill that swept over me. A cough, breaking the heavy breathing at my side, brought me to a startled sense of my surroundings.

Astonished beyond measure, I lay perfectly still. Our warm quilt—where was it? The blanket was at my knees. The sheet—yes, that remained, a flimsy protection for an old man whose blood courses slowly.

Had Mills kicked off our covers? He was lying motionless.

Then, to my horror, the blanket rubbed down my shins and fell softly upon the floor.

Against my self-avowed decision, I leaped out of the bed, groped for the matches that I always carry in my vest pocket and in ten seconds found the gas fixture with my tiny flame.

Shading the flame from Mills's eyes with one hand, I glared about with more consternation than I have ever felt, before or since.

At the foot of our bed lay the quilt in a tumbled heap. On top of it was piled the blanket.

Not a sign or sound to indicate the cause.

I shook, not alone from the frosty air that filled the room from the lowered upper sashes of the windows. A fright was upon me, it could not be denied. Death, suffering, ghastly accidents, all were familiar to me—but here in this silent, peaceful room, my knees knocked together and my teeth chattered like a frightened

schoolboy's. I could not help it.

Mills's hacking cough brought me to more steadiness of purpose. I replaced the bedclothes, turned the gas down but not out, and slid into bed again, glad enough to nestle close to my companion, for there was a freezing at my very marrow. I felt a great respect for Mills. How long had he endured this? What iron nerves the man must have!

He did not wake and, as for me, I slept no more, nor did I wish to. I heard each successive hour boom out, from two to five, but I feared the coming of the day as much as I wished for it. I feared to tell Mills that I could not solve his mystery.

Before six o'clock I was dressed and again examining the room, utterly discouraged, bewildered and upset. With but little more than an hour's sleep, a brain racked by a thousand wild ideas, and the awful sensation of the removal of that blanket—apparently without human agency—I had small desire for a repetition of my experience. But what was I to do? I had promised to see it through.

Mills's yawn broke upon my musings.

"Jove! That's a snooze, all right. Six hours, wasn't it? Never stirred from the time I hit the bed. Doctor, you are great medicine. I'll always follow your advice after this."

He had quite forgotten the imposition of silence. So, for that matter, had I.

"If that's true," I responded testily, "you'll pack your things and get out of this room today. That's *my* advice. I'm glad you rested well; I didn't!"

My patient hopped out of bed, turned the lights on full, for it was not yet daylight, and strode to where I stood.

"You—you don't mean—" he almost gasped.

My nod convinced him that I did mean all that he suspected.

"Well," he remarked, dully, "now you know what I have to put with. It's a nasty proposition to keep on tackling, but I shan't give up my room. No, sir!"

I threw up my eyes in despair. It was a fortunate glance. Had I not done so, the solution of our problem might never have been reached.

"Look!" I whispered excitedly, pointing to the ceiling above his couch.

"Jove!" breathed Mills, staring. "I never noticed that hole before. It certainly is a hole, not a spot!"

"It wasn't there last night," I muttered, and even as we moved forward for a closer view, the hole disappeared and the ceiling showed no trace.

Aghast, we scanned the dingy surface. I sprang for a chair.

"Here," exclaimed Mills, "I'll help," and he lifted me as if I had been a child. My fingers almost touched the papering above.

"Down," I whispered, after a moment of scrutiny. The man promptly set me on my feet.

All agitation had left me. I felt myself on the verge of a discovery. A circle, some two inches in diameter, was clearly discernible, directly over the foot of Mills's bed. I paced to the walls, then back and to the south window.

"The upper room—is it the same

size as this?" I asked hurriedly.

"No, only half the size. What are you driving at?"

"The solution of the mystery, that's all," I replied shortly. The occupant of the room above is the scoundrel who has disturbed you."

Mills scowled for a moment, then laughed outright.

"He? Thebeau?" he exclaimed. "Doctor, that fellow wouldn't hurt me. He's as harmless as a grasshopper and the butt of everyone in the house;—a foreigner, but he speaks good English in a stilted fashion. He's the soul of courtesy and good-nature. You can't ruffle him. I've tried it myself. Months ago, when he first came, I fairly insulted him, just to shut off his persistence. But I couldn't offend the little monkey."

"Don't be too sure about his not taking offense," I said. "What was it all about?"

"I stuffed a wad of money down his throat," Mills explained. "A hundred dollars it was, I think. My landlady was sick of his pestering, as I suit her and I pay promptly, so he had the impudence to try to buy me out."

"To buy you out," I echoed. "Out of what?"

"This room," replied my companion. "Thebeau said he wanted to live in this room and I refused to give it up to him, no matter how much he offered. When I refused him flatly and finally stuffed the money down his throat, he said—let's see, what was it he said? 'Not the money, eh?' he laughed. 'Then maybe something else, bye-and-bye, eh?' I never thought of that from that day to this. Doctor, you don't think—"

"I know," I interjected. "What is the rascal's business?"

"He invents things, I believe—automatic toys, delicate mechanisms for regulating machinery and the like." Mills's face grew grave. "We'll interview him at once," he added. "If the little foreigner's been playing tricks on me, I'll half kill him."

"Softly," I warned him, for his look frightened me. "No violence. Come," and, arm-in-arm, we stole up the stairs and knocked at a door on the third floor.

"Open," said an amiable voice. We went in.

In an armchair sat a funny-looking, fat little man, fully dressed and composedly smoking a cigarette.

Upon our entrance he arose and bowed low.

"Ah, gentlemen," he said, smilingly, with an apologetic wave of the hand. "Be seated. You are too smart for me. Alas! I am beaten. It is very distressing."

"So it was you, Thebeau," muttered Mills, red with anger. "You were at the bottom of this, after all."

"At the top, rather," chuckled the foreigner. "Calm yourself, my young friend; I am the defeated one. The good physician here—" and he made me a cordial salute.

"Doctor Emery," said Mills, with a snort. I nodded coldly. The man's politeness was suspicious.

"Yes, Doctor Emery; he will investigate and satisfy you. I shall observe. Pray proceed."

"Mills!" my voice was sharp. "Search this man thoroughly; I'll run no risk of a bullet or a knife-thrust."

"Sir!" For a second the mild eyes snapped. "I am a gentleman entertaining gentlemen. However," with a shrug of his shoulders, "have your pleasure."

Mills went through his pockets with creditable speed.

"No weapon," he reported. The beau beamed upon me forgivingly, then settled back into his chair.

"For you then to discover," he announced. "I watch with interest the unravelling of the mystery and your approbation. I contemplate, I do not assist."

There was nothing to do but to get to work. This strange culprit evidently regarded our visit as one of exploration and not meant in an unfriendly manner. I measured from the window and removed a small piece of matting.

"Good!" commented our host.

A tiny brass ring, lying flat upon the flooring, caught my attention and I tugged at it. Up came a neatly fitted piece of pine, so well fitted that only a keen eye could detect the difference. Lifting this handle, I drew out a tapering plug of wood, so finely polished and oiled that velvet could not have moved more smoothly. It rested in a close-fitting shell of the same material and reached to the ceiling below. The smaller end of the plug was painted a dingy yellowish white, exactly the color of the ceiling of Mills's room.

The man in the chair laughed.

"I like to do things well," said he. "It is exact, that plug. The arrangement is noiseless, the measurements calculated to perfection. Like a glove it fits. The sand-paper, the oil, make it noiseless. 'Up! no creak; down! no sound. Note the coloring of the end—it is lovely."

"But you can see nothing but the end of the bed!" I exclaimed.

"What more did I require?" he asked, cheerfully. "That was enough. The young man would not move his bed. Of that I was assure. He is too obstinate. I love him for the enduring, the jump, the swear, the hunt. Never the screech. Yes, he is a brave boy and I bother him no more."

"You might have caused his death, man," I reminded him, fiercely, for this matter had passed the practical-joke stage. "He has been exposed to these night drafts. A bad cough has settled in his lungs. You are responsible."

"Yes," agreed the little man. "It is so. But he would not give up. Would I? No. It was our battle—my ingenuity against his persistence, my endurance against his opposition. One of us must win. Alas, I have lost. By accident, a mere chance—a stranger's voice—my curiosity—I go to hear—I get caught. I am, what you say—'licked'?"

Mills grinned. I failed to see the humor of the situation. I was still cold from my nocturnal adventure.

"You're lucky to get off with so light a licking," I growled. "We've no time to lose hunting more mysteries. How did you manage to pull off those bedclothes?"

"I fished," said the little man, winking. "Great fun it was to feel those bites. Let us go to breakfast."

"Not yet," said Mills, his jaw set. "You're hiding something. No hook

could disentangle from the bedding. There are no rents, no signs of punctures of any kind. You fished, but how?"

"Yes," I broke in, angrily, "how?"

Seeing that we were in earnest and not to be denied, the little man lifted the cushion of the chair in which he sat and produced what appeared to be the case of a short fountain-pen.

"It is my own idea," he explained, a trifle plaintively, then unscrewed the case and dropped on my palm a most remarkable contrivance.

Imagine a metal rod the size of an ordinary parlor match, enclosed in a cylinder not larger than a small lead pencil and sliding in this socket with perfect precision. From the lower end of the rod depend five extremely sharp-pointed needle-like wires, very fine and flexible, each about an inch and a half long. These are welded firmly to the rod and project about an inch. They bend in any direction, as easily as the finest brass pin. By bending these wires upward, you would have a five-pronged hook capable of sustaining considerable weight. A leaden ring, attached to the upper part of the contrivance and kept in place by a flexible loop, permits of the straightening of the five prongs by a sudden jerk upon the silk line from which the whole is suspended.

The whole thing, as I saw, would not weight more than a few ounces, worked without a sound and, being painted a soft grey, would be practically invisible after dark, even if a night-light were burning. A steady pull would lift many pounds; a quick, hard jerk and the apparatus could not lift a rag.

Such is the peculiar, not to say uncanny, little instrument now lying before me, the product of an ingenious brain endeavoring to satisfy a whim and almost committing murder thereby.

I have just received a letter from Mills—that is what recalled the whole matter so vividly to my mind. He is in South America, looking over some electrical plants and with him, he writes me, is Thebeau!

"The little fellow is acting as companion and interpreter," says Mills, "and a good one he is. Besides, he is a very practical man—seems to be able to invent something to get us out of all the difficulties we get into."

I shouldn't wonder.

The Sable Wings of Charity

BY FRANK HEPBURN CRAWFORD

CARBINE shot split the night air, a bullet impinged against the top of the prison wall and went singing off down across the city, and a man in stripes dropped thirty feet to the city street.

He lay for a moment in a grotesque huddle where he had fallen, near the curb, in the inky shadow of the granite wall.

Beyond this sharp-cut shadow, at the end of the cross street, an October moon bathed the broad, asphalted avenue in a flood of cold light.

The man's chest heaved spasmodically. There was a rattling in his throat as he gasped for breath and turned slowly upon his side, and then upon his hands and knees.

He rose to his feet and stepped carefully forward and felt that he was limping. He stooped and examined his foot with his hand.

The heel of his right shoe had been torn off by the carbine shot.

The man heard quick footsteps behind him. He turned toward the two forms that approached him. "All I need," he admitted pleasantly, "is paper, matches and a bag of tobacco. I can make 'em myself." He stepped coolly in between the two, took an arm of each in his and walked out with them into the Hallowe'en moonlight.

The man who was dressed in the garb of a green devil thrust the end of his tail in his pocket and grinned appreciatively at the bareheaded man in the convict's garb.

"All he needs," he repeated, "is paper, matches and a bag of tobacco."

"That's it," agreed the one who carried a broad-bladed ax on his shoulder and was dressed in the wrinkled black hose and red mask of a headman. "It can make 'em itself. It says it. What the devil do you know about the nerve of it?"

He stared admiringly at the bareheaded man beside him.

"Say, you went the limit, didn't you? Even got your head shaved! You sure look the part all right. If it wasn't Hallowe'en you'd be pinched on sight."

"Yes," smiled the man in stripes, with an inflection of modesty in his tone. "I don't think the getup's half bad, myself. Which one of you has the tobacco?"

The devil reached inside his jerkin.

"You don't look like a man that would match up right with a cigarette. If you want a man's size, long, black stogie made right here in Pittsburgh out of imported Connecticut filler, with fine old Pennsylvania wrapper, why, smoke up."

"Good!" breathed the man in stripes, as he exhaled a puff of the heavy, fragrant smoke. "Good! Let's be moving. What do you say?"

Arm-in-arm they went down the middle of the brilliantly lighted, white-cliffed canyon, that begins at the gray-

stone prison on the hill and ends near the puncheoned block house at the head of the Ohio.

At each crossing the bareheaded man glanced to right and left. The streets were blocked with packed cars filled with gay onlookers, and traffic police at each corner held in check all vehicular movement east or west. But north and south, on this carnival night, ten thousand grotesque figures milled unmolested between the towering walls, and a turmoil of jangling cowbells, raucous rattles, blaring horns and shouting, filled the air.

The man held close to his companions' arms and drew them on slowly down the avenue through the rout. Somewhere, a bell had begun to toll.

At the southern end of the avenue, where the crowd had become less dense, the man in stripes halted abruptly. In the blaze of curb lights his searching eyes had caught sight of a line of blue-coated figures two feet apart, reaching from wall to wall, that was advancing slowly northward, through the crowd.

Closer to him he drew his chance acquaintances, whose own grotesqueness served to heighten the illusion of bizarre mummery created by his penal stripes, and he turned them back up the avenue again.

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But three blocks north the man, peering ahead through the crowd, saw a second line of blue that reached from wall to wall — that advanced step by step to meet that other line that had already thrust him back with its impalpable pressure.

"Say," inquired the devil, "are you seeing things?"

A headless form in flowing white edged through the mob.

"Yes! A ghost!" gasped the man, but he laughed aloud as he swung about.

They moved southward once more along the close-packed avenue. Half way down the square a hideously grinning baboon elbowed them apart.

The man in stripes was alone among the jostling thousands.

He edged over to the sidewalk. Before him was the vestibuled entrance to one of the few old-fashioned office building still left in the section. He stepped back through the vestibule, grasped the handle of the inner door and turned it. The door was locked. With cool fury he gripped the handle with both hands and twisted steadily. It was quietly done, but the screw of the handle shank was sheared off by the strain and the knob came loose in his hands, though the lock still held. The man dropped the knob silently in his pocket. He flexed his lean fingers appreciatively and turned to regard more closely whoever else might still chance to share his shelter.

He found himself face to face with two black-robed, black-hooded sisters of charity.

"We are not in costume," the taller of the two answered the inquiry in his eyes. "We are what we seem. We were caught in—this—in crossing the city, and took shelter here till the crowd should thin."

The man bowed. He stepped to the doorway and glanced up and down the avenue. From his point of elevation he could look over the heads

of the jostling crowd. Within one hundred feet of the doorway, in each direction, he could see the blue bar across the highway. Each moment brought the lines nearer to each other —and to him.

In a momentary spirit of aloofness he noticed, in vivid detail, the lighting scheme of a show-window, the gilded sign over a shop, the checkered facade of a towering white building where, here and there, on thirty floors, was going forward the nightly routine of office cleaning. He sensed the incongruity of this swift closing of the drama of his life in such a prosaic setting.

He turned back toward the rear of the vestibule.

"Good ladies, I think it might be well for you to go—now!"

The taller sister stepped to the entrance.

"I think not, yet." She shook her head. "The crowd is still too great."

He saw that she had the wide-eyed loveliness of Du Maurier's Trilby. And he saw in her bearing the unmistakable evidence of good birth and gentle breeding.

"But still, you must go—now," he insisted gently, "for here are three of us not in costume, sister. I, too, am what I seem."

"You!"

Suddenly he felt a childlike and resistless longing for a woman's understanding, for a woman's compassionate and divine forgiveness.

Through the din of the city's barbaric play, still came dropping heavily out of the night, the bell's alarm.

"In three minutes they will be here —I will be seen, and then—then I shall say goodnight to all the world," he told the pale girl beside him swiftly, "for I will not go back. And I find that I would not want—you—here, when that time comes. But hear me! Tonight, each night out in the world, a thousand, whom one tiny crumb from the rich world's plate would save, starve to death. But the crumb's withheld. Who then are the murderers? Last week a factory burned—a hundred girls, white-fleshed like you, with bosoms made for children's lips, were trapped and killed. Whose life is claimed for blood atonement? Today a people sing a chant of hate and the smell of men unburied poisons the air where that song is heard. Who walks in stripes up a scaffold's steps in penalty for that?

"I—I have—killed—one man—a man I had not hated. It was in his room. You perhaps have read? Benedict Grant, he was—a big man—and beautiful as Absalom. We played that night. He lost. He was given to sullen rages at times. That night he lost his hold upon himself. He said one thing—the unforgetable, unforgivable thing—of a woman, and I told him just how abominably he lied. It was primitive. He jerked a javelin from the wall and I found my hand upon a Fiji club.

"You will not leave? Then I must go to meet them, before they find me here. I would like a prayer from you to follow me—where I will be—tomorrow."

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could disentangle from the bedding. There are no rents, no signs of punctures of any kind. You fished, but how?"

"Yes," I broke in, angrily, "how?"

Seeing that we were in earnest and not to be denied, the little man lifted the cushion of the chair in which he sat and produced what appeared to be the case of a short fountain-pen.

"It is my own idea," he explained, a trifle plaintively, then unscrewed the case and dropped on my palm a most remarkable contrivance.

Imagine a metal rod the size of an ordinary parlor match, enclosed in a cylinder not larger than a small lead pencil and sliding in this socket with perfect precision. From the lower end of the rod depend five extremely sharp-pointed needle-like wires, very fine and flexible, each about an inch and a half long. These are welded firmly to the rod and project about an inch. They bend in any direction, as easily as the finest brass pin. By bending these wires upward, you would have a five-pronged hook capable of sustaining considerable weight. A leaden ring, attached to the upper part of the contrivance and kept in place by a flexible loop, permits of the straightening of the five prongs by a sudden jerk upon the silk line from which the whole is suspended.

The whole thing, as I saw, would not weight more than a few ounces, worked without a sound and, being painted a soft grey, would be practically invisible after dark, even if a night-light were burning. A steady pull would lift many pounds; a quick, hard jerk and the apparatus could not lift a rag.

Such is the peculiar, not to say uncanny, little instrument now lying before me, the product of an ingenious brain endeavoring to satisfy a whim and almost committing murder thereby.

I have just received a letter from Mills—that is what recalled the whole matter so vividly to my mind. He is in South America, looking over some electrical plants and with him, he writes me, is Thebeau!

"The little fellow is acting as companion and interpreter," says Mills, "and a good one he is. Besides, he is a very practical man—seems to be able to invent something to get us out of all the difficulties we get into."

I shouldn't wonder.

The Sable Wings of Charity

BY FRANK HEPBURN CRAWFORD

CARBINE shot split the night air, a bullet impinged against the top of the prison wall and went singing off down across the city, and a man in stripes dropped thirty feet to the city street.

He lay for a moment in a grotesque huddle where he had fallen, near the curb, in the inky shadow of the granite wall.

Beyond this sharp-cut shadow, at the end of the cross street, an October moon bathed the broad, asphalted avenue in a flood of cold light.

The man's chest heaved spasmodically. There was a rattling in his throat as he gasped for breath and turned slowly upon his side, and then upon his hands and knees.

He rose to his feet and stepped carefully forward and felt that he was limping. He stooped and examined his foot with his hand.

The heel of his right shoe had been torn off by the carbine shot.

The man heard quick footsteps behind him. He turned toward the two forms that approached him. "All I need," he admitted pleasantly, "is paper, matches and a bag of tobacco. I can make 'em myself." He stepped coolly in between the two, took an arm of each in his and walked out with them into the Hallowe'en moonlight.

The man who was dressed in the garb of a green devil thrust the end of his tail in his pocket and grinned appreciatively at the bareheaded man in the convict's garb.

"All he needs," he repeated, "is paper, matches and a bag of tobacco."

"That's it," agreed the one who carried a broad-bladed ax on his shoulder and was dressed in the wrinkled black hose and red mask of a headman. "It can make 'em itself. It says it. What the devil do you know about the nerve of it?"

He stared admiringly at the bareheaded man beside him.

"Say, you went the limit, didn't you? Even got your head shaved! You sure look the part all right. If it wasn't Hallowe'en you'd be pinched on sight."

"Yes," smiled the man in stripes, with an inflection of modesty in his tone. "I don't think the getup's half bad, myself. Which one of you has the tobacco?"

The devil reached inside his jerkin.

"You don't look like a man that would match up right with a cigarette. If you want a man's size, long, black stogie made right here in Pittsburgh out of imported Connecticut filler, with fine old Pennsylvania wrapper, why, smoke up."

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He turned swiftly but the thing was done.

The girl with the wide, gray eyes, had unknotted her cincture, had thrown her left arm about the man's shoulder so that her unloosened robe fell like a drooping sable wing behind him, and with her hand, she had caught up the other woman's arm in a tense grasp so that the man's stripes were hidden by their somber garments.

"Bow your head! Come!" she whispered.

He bent his head to the girl's height and the three stepped down to the pavement and out to where, for an instant, a space was clear, and then the girl with the wistful lips drew the others into a simple step and they danced their way through a little lane that opened up for them, till they neared one line of blue, and the girl snatched a feathered wand from a careless hand and saucily brushed with it the face of a stocky sergeant of police, and glanced archly back over her shoulder and laughed at him; and so the three danced out from that zone of death and then, in silence, moved on and away to where the streets were empty and quiet and dark. Then the girl drew gently away from the man whose head was bare.

They stood silently for a moment in the purple shadow of a belfry tower, beside a gray-stone, century-old churchyard wall.

"To try to put in words what is in my heart," the man spoke slowly, "would be so useless! But—"

He knelt and lifted the hem of the girl's black robe to his lips.

Then he stood before her, with his hands clasped behind him.

From where they had stopped they could see the green and red lights of a tow boat bound for the Gulf, gleaming across the silent river's ink-black surface; the blast of the steamboat's deep-toned whistle quivering on the cool night air.

"I have not the right to ask," the man spoke reverently, "but might I have a name to link with the memory of this night's charity—to carry with me to the end of my life?"

The girl, with eyes downcast, drew her companion's arm in hers. She moved silently away a step or two, then paused and turned and looked up steadily into the man's eyes.

"If, for what I have done this night, I should chance to be remembered through all those years of peace and happy freedom, I pray that you may have, then let it be as—Sister Benedicta."

"But, while you were of the world, when you were still a carefree girl, a little laughing child, may I not have that name, also, to bear in memory?"

"Ah! You ask—me—that?"

The girl called Sister Benedicta clasped her rosary with a quick gesture of sudden anguish. Her eyes were closed.

When at last she spoke again, it was in a voice of level tones and utter weariness.

"In the world, while my brother lived—my only brother, whom I dearly loved—my name was Janet, Janet Grant. My brother's name was Benedict."

The Settlement

BY HARRY STEPHEN KEELER

SLOWLY and painstakingly, cane in hand, Kirkland made his way along the fifth floor corridor of the Columbia Building. After studying each transom in turn, he finally stopped in front of one which bore the number 505. Then he lowered his gaze and stood for a fraction of a second, reading the sign painted on the ground glass panel of the door:

AMOS TRIGG
Attorney-At-Law

He turned the knob and walked in. An elderly man, with iron-grey hair and eyes framed in heavy, gold-rimmed spectacles, looked up from a desk where he was shuffling over several papers.

"Kirkland!" he exclaimed. "Phil Kirkland! Didn't expect to see you back in the land of walking people for at least a couple of days yet. Did you leave the hospital before my letter reached there?" He rose hastily and placed a chair for his visitor. "Here, boy, sit down. You don't look a bit strong yet."

"No, I'm not," admitted the younger man, sinking into the chair with a sigh of relief. "But regarding that letter, Trigg, it's worrying me. It reached me just as I was pulling out from the hospital. So, as soon as I could round up a cheap furnished room, I got down here as fast as a pair of hopelessly damaged legs could bring me. It's bad news, I'll warrant. I've been on my back for three months, and that—that—money was absolutely my last dependence."

For several minutes the lawyer stared from the window without speaking. Finally he reached into one of the pigeon-holes of his desk and withdrew a narrow packet of papers.

"Well, I'm afraid it *is* bad news," he stated, a look of pity lighting up his face for a bare instant as he caught sight of Kirkland's brown eyes staring at him so eagerly. "Not good news at any rate, my boy, not good news." He paused, studying the papers. "I'd better recount to you the facts just as they stand and carry you up to the occurrence of yesterday—which same occurrence caused me to drop that letter to you. Here they are, dates and all:

"Late in the evening of the fourth of May, according to this first slip, you were run down by an automobile at the corner of Michigan Avenue and 33rd Street. You were taken to the Wesley Hospital as soon as an ambulance could be telephoned for. And there they found that both of your legs had been broken above the knee."

Kirkland nodded unhappily. "Yes. And I sent for you next day to ask you to look into the case for me, since the machine that struck me had been running without lights."

"Exactly," assented the lawyer. "So I agreed to look into the case and see what I could do with it—at my usual terms, twenty per cent. Well, I've already told you how I rummaged around in the vicinity of Michigan Avenue and 33rd Street, and how I finally located a small cigar store whose owner had seen the whole accident—as well as several important features connected with it.

"According to his statement—which tallied with your own—the machine, with no lights whatever burning, had swept along at a terrific rate of speed, and, after knocking you down and passing over you, had flown on without even stopping to see whether you were killed or not.

"The street was almost devoid of people and machines at this late hour, and so, since two men were already picking you up, he had watched the car after it struck you and had seen it come to a stop not more than a block and a half away. He turned the key in the lock of his shop and hurried down to the point where the machine had drawn up at the curb. There he had come across the owner, obviously drunk, cursing to beat the band and hastily cranking up the engine. This accomplished, the latter had lighted the two headlights and pulled away from the spot. But our cigar store man was foresighted enough to get a description of the car, the driver, and the license number.

"I tell you, Kirkland, matters did look rosy to me. It certainly appeared as though we had a clear case against somebody—and all the necessary details, as well, for finding out who that somebody was. And let me say right here that it's high time that someone landed hard on those devilish scorchers—for it's getting to be so now that a pedestrian's not safe anywhere in Chicago except on the sidewalk. But to go back to the facts of the matter. You know how I looked up the license number at the City Hall and how I found that it had been issued to no less a person than Sam Hoggenheimer, the millionaire distillery man. And I didn't need any investigation to find out whether this Hoggenheimer's description tallied with the one given me by the cigar store dealer, for every lawyer at the Chicago bar knows Hoggenheimer. In litigation, Kirkland, he's a devil. He wins out in every law case with which he gets tangled up, simply because he's got the capital to carry his cases higher and higher; to buy off witnesses; in other words, to wear his opponent out.

"Well, the cigar store man promised faithfully that he'd go into court if necessary and testify as to Hoggenheimer's criminal negligence in running at a high rate of speed—if not exceeding the speed limit altogether—with no lights burning. So it looked as though we had old S. H. backed in a corner this time, dead to rights. As far as I could see, we had a chance to sue for $5000—which would give us a compromised sum of $2500. And that amount, of course, would give you $2000 clear. And I don't doubt that you deserve every penny, Kirkland, lying on your back for three long months with the knowledge that your legs would never be quite the same again."

"It was fearful, Trigg," assented Kirkland, uneasily. "The only thing that made it endurable was the knowledge that the man who had run me down was rich, and that I could get at least enough out of it—$2000— to buy up some little business where I could sit down for the greater part of the day. But about this bad piece of news—you've got me worried. What is it?"

"Yes, I'm coming to that. Well, during the next two and a half months following your injury, we were at a standstill on account of Hoggenheimer's sojourn at some California health resort where he was taking treatment for a valvular affection of the heart. He's a big, fleshy man, Kirkland, and a life of ease combined with loose living has put him more or less to the bad. And so, as you'll remember, he returned two weeks ago—just as you'd nearly served your sentence in the ward of the hospital. Of course I immediately called on him in his office. I told him that we had the descriptions of himself, of his car, and of his license tag. And I added that we possessed an unimpeachable witness to testify to those three things. I practically informed him that we had him dead to rights. And then I played my trump card—a card which, between you and me, was only sheer bluff. I declared that the man he had injured, Phil Kirkland, had wealthy relatives who would carry the case to the highest court in the state, if that were necessary, to obtain justice.

"Well, that trump card of mine, that bluff, seemed to impress him as nothing else had. He hemmed and he hawed. He scratched his chin. He chewed on his cigar. But he was foxy enough not to admit or deny that he was the man who had run you down. Finally he asked me what I'd consider a fair settlement for this damage suit that I intended to bring against him.

" 'Twenty-five hundred dollars,' I snapped back. 'My client's legs will never be as good as they were before the accident. And he's spent three months on his back.'

" 'Um'! was all he said. He seemed to be thinking it over. From what I've heard of Hoggenheimer I imagine he was figuring whether those hypothetical rich relatives of yours were backing you up as much as I declared. But finally he broke the silence. 'Mr. Trigg,' he grunted, 'as soon as your client leaves the hospital—which'll be in about two weeks, you say—fetch him to my office and I'll have him sign a release for me. Then I'll pay over to you the amount you've mentioned.'

"Well, Kirkland, as a lawyer, perhaps I should have suspected that he was merely playing for a delay. But my knowledge of that man's fortune as compared to a paltry $2500, completely misled me. I can't understand how anyone could hold back on an amount which, in addition to being an entirely just debt, was nothing but a drop in the bucket to him. And so I left the office.

"Day before yesterday I called him up and told him that I'd be in his office with you in three days. To my utter dumfoundment he jumped all over me, called me a shyster lawyer, told me that I could bring action and

be damned—and that I had nothing on him.

"Quick as a flash, I suspected that he'd got hold of some inside information about you; that he had learned in some way that I had been bluffing absolutely on the subject of your financial backing; that he'd ascertained that you didn't have a relative or a soul who could help you out in a long court fight. But there was assuredly, assuredly I say, no way for Hoggenheimer to have suspected that—much less to have known it.

"At any rate, I grabbed my hat, caught a street car, and went down to see our star and only witness, the cigar store owner. To my chagrin the store was sold out to a new man—and the former owner had vanished without leaving even a forwarding address. I located the place where he had boarded. He'd left there also. Back I went to the new proprietor of the cigar store and commenced quizzing him. He admitted that he dimly remembered seeing a big, fleshy man—and Hoggenheimer's just such a person—talking to the former owner of the store on the day that the bill of sale was signed.

"The inference is obvious—too obvious. Hoggenheimer got inside information, in some way, that you were penniless—and without relatives or influential friends. So he rummaged around too, located our sole witness, slipped him a hundred or two, and packed him out of the state—possibly to Canada. To boil my whole narrative down to a single sentence, Kirkland, we've lost our case. With our witness gone and our bluff punctured, we haven't a leg to stand on. It looks mighty bad."

For a full minute Kirkland said nothing. He was stunned, overwhelmed, panic-stricken at the sudden and unexpected turn of affairs for him. Just as he was on the verge of receiving $2000 as compensation for a pair of hopelessly stiff and crooked legs—which was poor compensation indeed—the amount was snatched from his hands on account of the cupidity of a man who had more wealth than he knew what to do with. Vainly Kirkland tried to brace up under the engulfing wave of bitterness and dejection that swept over him—but to no avail. He realized dimly that now he stood face to face with unemployment, very likely hunger, for how long could a man live on $7—and who would take on an employe whose legs were incapacitated for protracted standing? Finally he pulled himself together and spoke.

"That news is worse than bad, Trigg; it's fierce. I've been counting all along on that money to buy out some little business. For years I've been standing on my feet as a clerk at Huntley and McGuire's big dry-goods store. I never had any education nor pull—and I've never expected to get anything better than that. But even that's knocked out for me now—and the $18 a week that was attached to it looks like a fortune to me. And now—now—" He stopped helplessly and tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

"I'm certainly sorry, Kirkland," said the attorney. "It's not the loss of my own $500 share of that compromise money that troubles me—for

I can live. But I'm honestly worried about you. We're up against a well-defined case of crooked work—which we can't prove. Hoggenheimer simply rustled around, tumbled into some bona fide information that you had no one to back you up, went down and paid our witness to sell out and leave town, knowing that he could outbid us by waving some cold cash under the latter's nose.

"As a matter of fact, I've taken steps to bring action today—and I'll stand the small preliminary expense myself. But Hoggenheimer's word is as good as ours—and in conjunction with a phony alibi will knock us silly in a court of law." He paused, looking down at the roaring traffic. "At least, Kirkland, you have the consolation of knowing that there's only yourself to support. You've no wife—no child. You can surely get by in some way."

For a bare instant a rather bitter smile flashed across Kirkland's face.

"I once had the prettiest wife you could conceive of—and the most wonderful baby girl that ever lived," he said tenderly.

"A wife! A baby girl!" exclaimed Trigg. "Why, I've never heard you mention 'em. Dead—are they?"

"The little girl—yes; and the wife—dead to me. There wasn't much to it, Trigg. I married her five years ago. She was pretty—too pretty, I guess, to be contented on $18 per. Life in a stove-heated flat never quite satisfied her. Although I honestly never blamed her for that attitude, it surely worried me.

"After the little girl was born I thought that perhaps she'd be more contented. But she wasn't. Later—much later—she got a chance to go on the stage in a chorus part. So she left me. Even at that I'd have stuck to her always, knowing that she might some day come back to me—and her own little daughter. But finally the little one took sick. I guess I'll never forget that last night, Trigg, that horrible night when the doctor told me her chances for living were slim. With her tiny velvety cheeks flushed—and her little blue eyes bright with fever, she kept calling continually for her mother. 'Mama, mama,' she cried, over and over, 'p'ease tum back to me, mama.' God—how my heart seemed to be grinding slowly to pieces.

"I hurried to the nearest telegraph office and sent a wire to the one who had left me shortly before—and who was in the city at that very instant. It said: 'Dolly, come over to North Side at once; baby not expected to live; calls you continually. Phil.' An hour later her reply reached me: 'Can't come; rehearsing for leading part in the Star Burlesquers; probably the doctor exaggerates. Dolly.' And at dawn my poor little baby girl passed away. The last thing she did was to thrust out her tiny arms and whisper faintly: 'Mama, mama, why you don't tum back to me?' "

Kirkland stopped. He stared hard at the foot of the desk. Then his hand suddenly clenched and unclenched.

"Damn her, Trigg," he burst out; "I divorced her two weeks later And to this day, I've never seen her, nor heard of her—with the single exception that I was once told that she was playing in burlesque under the

stage name of Dolly van Sutten."

"Heavens, boy," commented Trigg emphatically, "she was no woman—no mother at all. Why she—she—she was a beast, a brute." He sat for a moment thinking. Then he stood up and placed his hand on the other's shoulder, adding brusquely: "Well, Kirkland, you've had your share of life's digs, there's no doubt about that. But try not to take it to heart. Go home—and don't worry. Come in again day after tomorrow. I'll have action instituted before that time. And we never know what developments are going to enter into any case."

Slowly Kirkland made his way down the corridor. He descended in the elevator. Once out on the street, he mounted a car. For a long while he rode northward. Finally, however, he dismounted and walked stiffly and clumsily along a side street until he reached the steps of a dingy rooming-house. He opened the outer door with his latchkey, and, step by step, resting every five or six steps, he ascended a stairway covered with a faded and threadbare carpet. When he reached the third floor, he proceeded along the hall until he came to the doorway of a rear room. Here he thrust another key in the aperture of the lock and shortly swung open the door, displaying to his gaze the room he had rented several hours before. Its floor was covered with dusty, yellow matting. It was fitted with a narrow iron bed. Its only remaining articles of furniture were a straight wooden chair and a washstand on which stood a cracked yellow pitcher and a washbowl.

He closed the door quietly, tossed his hat on the chair, and stood for a few seconds gazing unseeingly out on a dirty back yard, littered with broken milk bottles and rusty tin cans. Then he spun suddenly around and despairingly flung himself face downward on the bed.

For a long time he lay without moving, trying unavailingly to grasp the fact that he was confronted with the oldest problem of life—the problem that concerned the means of existence itself; face to face with the necessity of finding some sort of immediate employment, no matter how poorly paid, by which he could remain off his feet.

One thing was certain: he must replenish his capital soon, for at the very most it could last him but seven or eight days. Bitterly, he began to wonder why the man, Hoggenheimer, rich even in the modern accepted sense of the word, should take such evident joy in saving the paltry sum that for him, Kirkland, meant the sole chance of a halfway happy future.

He shuddered involuntarily when the recollection recurred to him of how, on the night of May fourth, the great whirring machine had sprung swiftly and silently at him from the darkness, unheralded by either the warning honk of the horn or the blaze of even one headlight. In turn, the long, tedious days in the hospital came back to him, with their consoling thoughts that the man who had run him down would surely recompense him after returning from the Pacific coast.

Vividly he recalled the thrill of satisfaction that had shot through him

when Trigg walked into his hospital ward two weeks before and announced that Hoggenheimer had agreed to compromise matters for $2500. From that time on, naturally, he had ceased worrying altogether. And then—yesterday—had come the note from Trigg with its peculiar tone that hinted of bad news. And, on top of this, the latter's statement that Hoggenheimer had laughed the case to scorn, and that the sole witness had been spirited away.

Truly, the ways of the rich were mysterious. What could have caused that sudden change in Hoggenheimer? How could he have learned, if such were really the case, that the man he had injured was without money, relatives, or friends; that he was absolutely unable to engage in a legal battle?

Slowly the afternoon faded away and the dusk came on, throwing a pall over every object in the room. And still Kirkland lay on the bed thinking, pondering, brooding. And following the dusk came darkness. In turn the old clock downstairs in the hallway of the rooming-house toned forth the hour of six, of seven, of eight.

Suddenly an idea smote him with such intensity that he raised himself up in the darkness and sat on the edge of the bed, with his heart beating wildly. Why not go straight to Hoggenheimer himself? Why not secure an interview with him in his own home and show him the poor distorted limbs? Why not plead with him for some exhibition of justice? Why not see whether the personal element could conquer the unreasoning attitude of a man who had shown himself anxious only to conserve his own wealth?

Within five minutes Kirkland was making his way, cane in hand, toward the corner drug store. Inside, he seized the directory feverishly and turned rapidly to the H's. Finally he came across the notation for which he was searching:

Hoggenheimer, Samuel: bachelor, res. 1250 *Lake Shore Drive.*

An hour later he was walking slowly along Lake Shore Drive, carefully studying the numbers of the magnificent residences that lined "Millionaires' Row." Soon he glimpsed the number 1250, showing plainly through the lighted transom of a splendid, brownstone house which stood some distance from the street in a spacious yard.

As he looked dubiously at the number, wondering whether his contemplated procedure would be condemned by Trigg, a man clad in the blue livery of a servant came down the steps, walked along the path that led to the sidewalk, jerked open the ornamental iron gate, and proceeded leisurely up the street. With a curious glance at the latter's retreating figure, still visible in the radiance of a distant flaming arc lamp, Kirkland turned in at the gate and proceeded up the gravel path. Only for a moment did he hesitate in the vestibule with his finger on the electric button. Then he gave it an energetic push.

From where he stood he could hear a bell ring loudly. He waited—but no one answered the door. Again he pressed the button. And still no re-

ply. Then for the third time he gave it a long ring. And after another short wait he reluctantly descended the front steps. At their foot he paused irresolutely, glancing upward. Then he detected a gleam of light showing forth in the darkness from a second floor window at the side of the house.

Wonderingly he crossed the lawn and peered upward. He found himself able to make out with ease the outlines of a fleshy man sitting at what appeared to be a small desk. For several long minutes Kirkland wavered, wondering whether, in the absence of the servant, it would be quite diplomatic for him to ring for the fourth time. But as he stood there, vacillating from one plan to another, he became conscious, with a shock, that the figure at the desk was unnaturally quiet. So he fixed his attention more closely on the lighted window. Now that he studied the man in the upper room more intently, he became aware of the fact that the latter's head hung down on his chest at a greater angle than the mere writing necessitated.

Kirkland glanced quickly about him. The street was deserted. He himself was shrouded in the darkness of the house. So he stooped and picked up a handful of pebbles, which he flung forcibly upward. They rained on the lighted window with a loud staccato noise and then dropped back upon the lawn.

And still the figure remained absolutely motionless, totally undisturbed!

With more speed than he believed possible for him to attain, Kirkland hurried clumsily up the front steps for the second time. Once more he pressed the electric button, but this time he kept his finger on it for a full five minutes. Then he returned to the lawn. The figure had not moved by a quarter of an inch.

Hurriedly he glanced along the edge of the house. An open basement window caught his eye. Perplexed, he stood biting his lip.

"That man's not asleep," he muttered finally, half aloud. "He's sick —or else he's dead; one thing or the other." He glanced upward once more. "I guess it's up to me to do the 'phoning for the doctor. I'll risk it, anyway."

He stepped quietly across the stretch of dark grass to the open basement window. There he let himself slowly in, hanging from the stone sill by his arms. Swinging one leg back and forth, he stretched his foot until the toe scraped the floor. A second later he had let himself down to a standing position. He struck a match and located a doorway which led to an uncarpeted hall. Along the hall he walked and, by the light of another match, found a flight of stairs which he ascended slowly, leaning heavily on the banister at each step. After he had covered one flight, he felt under foot a soft, thick carpet. Groping along the wall, he climbed on to the second floor. Then, confused in the darkness, he turned slowly around. At once he spied a tiny shaft of light emanating from a keyhole. Cautiously he felt his way over to it, and stooping, peered in.

Seated at a desk in a richly furnished room was the same figure he

had seen from the outside lawn—and even yet it had not moved. On the desk itself was an envelope propped up against a paperweight, a narrow strip of colored paper, and a larger sheet of business size paper. Close by was a steel contrivance which Kirkland recognized instantly as a check protector. On a small stand nearby, was a typewriter. As his gaze shifted to the writing machine, he caught sight of a fountain pen lying on the floor directly below the pendant hand of the silent figure.

For Kirkland, that was enough. He flung the door open and walked boldly in. Immediately he laid his hand on the forehead of the man at the desk. His suspicions were verified at last. The forehead was stone cold!

As Kirkland stood there, dazed, wondering what step to take next, his attention was riveted by the inscription on the envelope. He snatched it up and stared unbelievingly at it. It read:

Dolly van Sutten,
The Star Burlesquers,
Folly Theatre,
Chicago.

With his thoughts in a mad whirl, totally forgetful of his surroundings, entirely oblivious to the dead man at his side, he leaned over the desk and drank in every word of the letter—a letter which had been cut short by the hand of the Grim Reaper. It ran:

Dear Dolly:—

Your information regarding the fellow I wrote you about, that Philip N. Kirkland, who got tangled up in the machine three months ago, was certainly surprising, to say the least. So he's your ex-hubby, eh? And a poor mutt who has to depend on $18 per for his bread and cheese? And as to your added information that he's absolutely without any relatives or any financial drag, that throws an entirely new light on matters. And so, Dolly, I'll certainly follow your advice about lying low and waving a couple of hundred under the nose of him and his shyster lawyer as soon as they see that they're up against a 'caseless' case. I guess you're right—they'll be glad to grab it. And to think, Dolly, that that lawyer of his had me bluffed to a fare-you-well, with a lot of bunk talk. I nearly coughed up the whole 2500 simoleons.

Now, Dear Girl, I note that your letter says I've forgotten your birthday. No such a thing. The truth of the matter is that I've been rushed to death the last few days with specialists, consultations, and what not else. They claim that my heart is on the blink (truth is—you've got that heart!) and that I'll have to go East to be thumped by still another specialist in New York. Beastly nuisance, I call it. Honestly, I think they're all up in the air about it—and that they're only out for my money.

But now—as to that birthday of yours. I want to buy you a little trinket—but I'm going to let you make the selection yourself. For that reason I'm enclosing a signed check, with the spaces blank, so that you can fill in the jeweler's name and the amount of your purchase. Before mailing it I'll limit it to $500 with the check protector; so get what your little heart desires—up to that amount. And as soon as I get back from the East we'll—

Here the letter stopped abruptly. Bewildered, Kirkland passed the back of his hand over his brow—and the sheet of paper fluttered to the floor. Suddenly he stiffened up and glanced with a sneer toward the figure that still sat huddled up in the chair.

Then he stepped to the window and drew down the shade.

"My dear Kirkland," exclaimed Trigg exultantly, "the most astounding thing occurred in the night while you were asleep. I've come straight to your room to tell you all about it. At one o'clock this morning, a special-

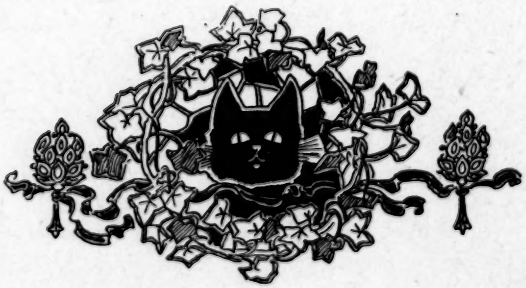
delivery letter was delivered to me at my house, marked 'urgent, open at once,' and 'special'—all on the typewriter. In it was a short typewritten note—and confound it, Kirkland, signed on the typewriter, too—from our friend, Sam Hoggenheimer, himself. He told me briefly that he was going East today and that I should cash the enclosed check immediately the bank opened. And in it was a signed check—with my name as attorney, and the amount, $2500, inserted with the typewriter. So I—"

"Did you cash it?" interrupted Kirkland, pale, tense, leaning half out of his chair.

"Eh? Did I cash it? My boy, I've been a lawyer too long to let a check get cold on *my* hands. I was Johnny on the spot when the bank opened—my own bank, too, by the way—and got it all in yellowbacks. And say, Kirkland, I was just in time, for when I called up his place ten minutes later to thank him, I was informed that he'd passed over the great divide at some indefinite time between nine o'clock last night and nine o'clock this morning. And a dead man's check is worthless. Whew! Great mackerel—what a narrow escape for us!" He paused and his face lighted up suddenly. "And say, Kirkland, I've rounded you up a job making out bills and statements. Do you think you could learn to operate a typewriter?"

"Sure do," replied Kirkland, staring out of the window at a cloud. "I've had a—a—little experience on the—the machine. Some day, Trigg, I'll tell you about it."

And a year later, he did!



The Ladder that Worked Both Ways

BY IVY FLETCHER

BY courtesy it was Anne's garden. In reality it was twenty-four hundred square feet of arid soil in the heart of New York, with a rambling old house for centrepiece, that looked as if it were only waiting to decide in which direction to fall ere it performed that final ceremony. The whole was inclosed by a brick wall of gigantic proportions. A few despondent shrubs ranged themselves along the wall, as if to lean the weight of their tired heads against it. This wall was the chief object of interest the garden boasted, for besides the orchestra of cats that nightly ranged themselves along its summit—on the other side lay the land of delight.

Anne, who had no incentive to become learned in the social lore of the City, vaguely knew that it was the town house of a very rich family, the Prescotts; that they occupied it but seldom on account of its rather undesirable location, but that they wouldn't dispose of it because of some old family tradition. During the brief periods when the house beyond the wall was occupied, Anne's short time of romance lived. Often, then, faint sounds of lovely music floated to her, or gay voices and peals of silvery laughter. And out in her garden, she listened and dreamed the hours away.

One evening, just before cold weather closed the garden's resources, a hammock was swung between two consumptive looking shrubs that should have been trees, but they decided at the halfway stage that there was no use in it. In the hammock was a girl. The girl was Anne. You could know it was Anne by the coppery gleam in her hair where it was caught in a stray sunbeam that had fallen, by mistake, into the garden. Anne was warm-tinted and wholesome—and twenty-four. She scarcely remember her mother, but had kept house for many years for a dreamy, absent-minded old father, who persisted in going through life laboring under the delusion that he was an author. At present, household expenses were eked out with the rent paid by a quiet, unobtrusive old couple, who used a part of the house. Anne spent most of her time where she was then, weaving happiness out of dreams, and imagining the romance that did not reach her life.

At present she was very much interested in the possibilities beyond the wall. She had learned from a newspaper dropped by their old lodger, that the Prescotts were at home and would give an elaborate masked ball the following week.

"I've read in many novels," thought Anne, "how adventure and romance single out the waiting heroine and come to her all unasked, but it seems

to me, if one wants anything interesting in real life she must go and hunt for it." Anne always thought in the feminine gender because she was her own heroine. She clasped both hands under her head and gazed up at the little patch of blue sky visible. Suddenly she sprang to a sitting posture with such expedition that she almost upset the hammock and herself as well.

"Why not?" she exclaimed aloud. Then, as the despondent shrubs and consumptive trees offered no objection, she continued her rapid thinking, too excited to return to her former position. "Why shouldn't I go in search of adventure since it won't come to me? *Why not go to that ball?* There are rope ladders that swing over and there are wooden ladders that go straight up—and it's to be a *bal masque,* so I'll run no risk at all. I can escape before the unmasking begins." She paused a moment. "I'll do it," she solemnly informed the wall. "I have eight hundred dollars all my very own, that Aunt Anne left me because I was named for her. I can't have any fun with it in this kind of life anyway, and this is my very first adventure. I'll use it all, if necessary, to get a perfectly proper outfit. Nothing venture, nothing win; I'll have one night of fun to remember all my life. 'Mischief, thou art afoot, go, take what course thou wilt.'" With this final dare flung at the fates, she hurried in to lay her plans.

On the important night, the old-fashioned mirror in Anne's room revealed a picture to tempt the gods. Anne, straight and slender, in delicious curves and dimples, gazed at herself with gratified surprise. "You do me credit, my dear," she dimpled at the picture. Her gown was what a French *artiste* would call a creation. It hung in shimmering folds of satin looped up with pearls. Pearls gleamed from the piled-up coils of her ruddy hair and sparkled on the tips of the tiny white satin pumps. Her eyes gleamed like twin stars and excitement had brought a vivid color to the rounded cheeks. A low laugh of triumph parted the most inviting red lips in the world. She slipped the mask over her eyes, but instead of covering charms it only hinted tantalizingly of still greater witcheries than those revealed. Next, the black domino enfolded the costly draperies of the ball gown and with a last, lingering glance at the mirror, Anne turned away.

Out in the garden a ladder stretched to the top of the wall, and attached to that, a rope ladder hung down on the other side. An obliging butcher's boy had helped her transplant the ladders, and she had discovered that a thick growth of vines and shrubs on the other side concealed the rope ladder and its amazing possibilities from view. Drawing a long breath, Anne gathered up her draperies and swiftly ascended one ladder and descended the other. She didn't pause at the top of the wall for fear her courage would fail at the last moment.

Anne descended into Fairyland. The place had been made into an artificial forest. Small trees, rare shrubs, and lovely flowers, were bathed in a flood of silvery moonlight. Brilliant

electric lights were so shaded as to aid the moonlight without appearing to differ from it. The sounds of music, dancing, and gay voices, floated from wide-open windows. Anne gazed about her in a sudden panic. Common sense, reason, and inclination, urged her to escape, but pride and romance refused to give up their portion so easily. "It's up to me, now I'm here. I can't be hurt, anyway," she thought. A small, vine-clad arbor offered an entrancing haven, and to this she hurried—to await her fate. As it happened, she had not long to wait.

Anne rushed blindly into the fragrant dimness of the arbor and also into a pair of outstretched masculine arms evidently waiting to receive her. With a frantic little shriek she extricated herself. "Did I frighten you, my darling?" said a low, deep, and by no means unpleasant masculine voice that matched the arms. "Alicia," continued the voice, "it was so good of you to come. I was half afraid you couldn't escape the old duenna."

Our little Anne's wits came back with a suddenness that was surprising. Why, this was romance in earnest! This was what she had hoped for, planned for; and she must rise to meet the occasion like a heroine. "I *am* here." She flashed at him a Mona Lisa smile, and then, before she moved her head out of the way of a wandering moonbeam, it revealed a sparkle of pearly teeth behind scarlet lips parted in a ripple of daring laughter. He could even see the dazzling gleam of her eyes through the little mask. "Alicia," he murmured solemnly, "you have always been charming; tonight you are wonderful; you are staggering."

"Did you lure me all this way just to tell me that?" pouted Anne, and was instantly sorry.

"God! no!" he muttered, seizing both her hands and crushing them in his. "I love you, Alicia. Heaven knows, I didn't realize how much until tonight—*now*. Little girl, say 'Yes.' Look at me, tell me you love me." Anne was in a blue funk. She had not bargained for this. What should she say? She must gain time somehow, and then escape.

"What do you love about me?" she questioned softly.

"You, yourself, your beauty, everything that goes to make a part of you. But, most of all, your personality, the delicious 'you' that is so different from everyone else. Strange to say, that is the part I never realized—until you came to me here like a dream out of the summer night."

"Perhaps you don't know me as well as you think," suggested Anne naively.

"Know you! I've known you a thousand years."

"Heavens, my age!" sighed Anne.

"You know what I mean; don't trifle, Alicia, dear. Eons before time was, it was meant that you should be my mate, and, first in one guise, then in another, my soul has been seeking you ever since. Alicia," he drew her a little toward him, and she could see the pleading in those deep brown eyes, "do you remember the day, ten years ago, when I went away and you gave me the little bead ring you had made for me? I have loved you always, although since then, until two days

ago, I have known nothing of you except your dear letters that were always true to the love you bore your boy friend. Tell me you care a little."

Moved by a daring, irresistible impulse, Anne leaned over to him until her lips almost touched his ear and whispered swiftly, "I care," then she sprang up, but he caught her to him passionately. "No—not that—yet," breathed Anne incoherently, as she struggled to free herself.

"It shall be as you wish, darling. Sit down," and he gently pulled her down beside him. "Look," he said, and drew from his pocket a little case. From this he took an odd-looking ring, woven rudely of beads—silver and gold, pearl, pink and blue. "Do you remember this?" Anne smiled. "Wear it, dear, for a day or two, until I can replace it with another," and he slipped it on her engagement finger. "I must go," Anne murmured. He arose and held out his hand. "I'd rather not go in with you please. Please go first," stammered Anne. "Perhaps it would be as well," he answered; "the duenna is likely to fuss about conventionalities," and with a lingering glance at her he disappeared.

Catching up her skirts, Anne, with one bound, cleared the arbor and sped to the ladder. Never before nor since has she climbed a ladder with so much expedition. She had the presence of mind to pause at the top and swing the rope ladder over. Having gained the security of her own room, she tore off the mask and domino and sat down to gaze at the bead ring shining on her white finger.

"Oh, it was wicked," she breathed, "but no one will ever, ever know; and he will explain things to that other girl and—they will live happy ever after."

Strange to say, this happy adjustment did not seem to afford Anne unmixed satisfaction, for a sudden tear splashed on the shimmer of the bead ring and soon after, she crept into bed to live it all over again.

Cecil Granval went round to the library window, intending to enter that way so as to be unobserved. He was thinking of the girl he had left behind in the fragrance of that rose-twined arbor, when he brought up abruptly, and a low word that could by no means have been mistaken for a blessing, escaped his lips. Then, forgetting all the obligations of courtesy, he stood and stared. The library window was the frame for a picture that, while pretty enough, emphatically did not meet with his approval. You must admit it would be something of a shock to leave a girl who had just accepted your proposal, sitting among the roses in a dusky arbor, and then, taking a few quick steps, to view her in the loving embrace of another man. The moonlight was playing him no trick, he decided, as he rubbed his hand confusedly across his eyes. Alicia had thrown off her mask, and her domino had slipped from her shoulder. Her fair, but rather insipid face, was upturned to meet that of Howard Clayton's bent lovingly above her. Her hands were on his shoulders and his arms encircled her waist. For a long ten minutes they stood thus—then—their lips met and Cecil fled.

Back to the arbor he rushed, to find it tenanted only by the roses. No, there was something else. Down by the rustic seat lay a tiny mass of foamy lace which, as he raised it, yielded a delicate fragrance of wild roses. He thrust this into his pocket and began a rapid search of the garden. There was not another trace of his goddess of the night; she had vanished completely. Presently he returned to the arbor seat to collect his thoughts. It could not possibly have been Alicia, after all. She *could not* have reached the library and that position before he got there unless he had been in a trance. In very truth, he would have believed the whole thing a dream but for the cobweb of lace in his pocket. As to Alicia, it was evident she loved Clayton. Did he care? As he wondered, Anne's low, rippling laugh came to him again, the flash of white teeth, the dazzle of her eyes behind the mask—the whole mystifying, tantalizing, delicious personality of her. And he resolved to find the girl he had proposed to in the garden.

As in a dream, Cecil made his way back to the ballroom. Alicia floated up to him with a prettily worded excuse for having been "detained." "You see, I just *couldn't* come," she finished.

"Oh!" he muttered, with a sudden flash of his white teeth.

"Now where have you been so long, Sir Truant?" she pouted. "I'm sure you were not waiting for me all this time."

"No," he answered coolly; "I was not waiting for you." She turned away with a dainty shrug, dropping her handkerchief as she did so. As Cecil stooped for it, he raised it hurriedly to his face. It bore distinctly the odor of lilies of the valley; so, he noticed, did the lace of her dress, as she moved close to him to take it. He glanced at her finger. Instead of the childish bead ring, a magnificent diamond held sway. He walked away with a strangely contented feeling at his heart. But now to solve the mystery of the divinity of the arbor. She *must* be among the guests. They were unmasked now, and carefully he approached each one until he satisfied himself that the girl was not there. Then he sought out his hostess.

"Aunt Sophie," he said, sinking into the place, on the divan, she made for him, with a smile, (everybody welcomed Cecil Granval with a smile), "which of your guests left early?"

"Why none," she said in some surprise. "No one has gone yet; why?"

"Oh, nothing! Only I thought that I noticed a young lady here earlier in the evening, who is not here now. She wore pearls in her hair," he added as a sudden thought struck him.

"Mamie Asquith has pearls in her hair," said his aunt amusedly, as she indicated a tall, lank young lady, of doubtful age and still more doubtful complexion.

"Aunt Soph," exclaimed Cecil in disgust, "you *know* I didn't mean her."

"Well, then, my dear boy," replied his aunt laughing, "I'm afraid I can't help you. There's no one here that you are not well acquainted with or were not carefully introduced to. This affair is entirely for you, you know."

In after years, Anne was wont to call the months that followed, the

"winter of her discontent." She was not sure what ailed her, but supposed it was a vague longing for a permanent share in the fairyland of which she had caught a glimpse. Sometimes she repented bitterly, the folly that caused her days of repining and nights of unrest. At other times, as she gazed at the little bead ring and felt again the warm clasp of those strong arms that had been round her for one brief second, she was "glad, glad," she told herself defiantly. If all her days were to be a drab tint, it were worth while to have for a memory a vision of a dream-hued arbor and one glorious night when she knew herself to be beautiful and felt herself to be beloved.

One sunny morning in early spring, Anne, in her neat little toque and her one good suit, went to walk in the park.

"It always looks the same," she thought wearily—"the same benevolent old gentlemen talking to the same polite little girls; the same nursemaids with their charges in the various moods of infancy," as one energetic young hopeful sent up a lusty yell; "the same girls cantering by on horseback; innumerable passing cars; and occasional pedestrians." She sat down on a bench by the lily pond, where some children were throwing little cakes to the swans. A few moments later a gentleman sat down beside her. When, in the course of a few minutes, Anne raised her eyes to his face, the widely renounced spider couldn't have had a worse effect on her. Her face paled even to the lips. With a nervous flutter she raised both hands to her face and let down her veil. Then rising, she glided behind some bushy shrubs and almost ran down the first path that led to an exit.

"Anne dear," said her father one day, with an unusually animated expression on his face, "what do you say to a little trip, you and I? 'Tis seldom you have any pleasure, poor child."

"It would be very nice, papa," replied Anne dutifully, "but what about the inevitable where-with-all?"

"Well, my dear," said the old gentleman, rubbing his hands together, "to tell the truth, I've had a little success. I've just sold several articles at a very good price—a *very* good price, and I have the order for another one here." He patted his waistcoat pocket.

"Really, dad!" Anne dropped the pen she had been nibbling reflectively and clapped enthusiastically. "Where are we going?" she asked, suddenly.

"It is your choice," she was assured.

"Then, as the season is ripe, we go to Saratoga," announced Anne.

Cecil Granval took up his quest eagerly for the girl with the bead ring. He frequented every affair of the season to which he was invited, and as he was one of the most popular men in town these were numerous. He sought all the select places of amusement that he knew of, gazing at the faces and fingers of all good-looking girls with a feverish intensity that sometimes created not a little wonder and suspicion. He became a confirmed theatre-goer. But all to no avail. It was as if the girl had indeed vanished into thin air. One fresh

spring morning he strolled into the park, trying to walk off a discouraged feeling. After a long jaunt he threw himself down on a bench by a lily pond. Some little girls stood close by, throwing food to the swans, he noticed idly. The only other occupant of the bench, a quick glance assured him, was a very quietly dressed young lady with her face turned from him. Suddenly, a well remembered fragrance stole to his nostrils—the scent of wild roses. At first he thought it a part of the old dream he was living over—the arbor scene and the roses drenched in the moonlight—but it lingered, gradually making itself felt as something real and tangible. He looked up hastily and gazed about him in a dazed way. The girl who had sat beside him was gone. Could it be possible? He had not for a moment associated that severely plain little gray back with the sparkle of jewels and hint of costly laces he had seen for such a maddeningly short time. "I'll give the whole thing up," he exclaimed in disgust. "It's turning me into a bally idiot. Whatever I do, this one obsession is eating my soul out." That night he retracted his refusal to accompany Mrs. Prescott to Saratoga.

New York's gayest watering place was crowded to the utmost capacity, for the season was at its height. Cecil Granval entered a fashionable, but quiet café, and without bestowing a glance on his neighbors, seated himself and picked up a menu card. He glanced up as a waiter bent obsequiously over him and then started, his gaze arrested by a bead ring that encircled the finger of a girl at the next table. At the same moment, Anne's startled eyes rested on his face in a long mirror beside her. She rose hastily, stepped behind the mirror and disappeared by a side door. Cecil sprang up, then recollected that it would never do to make a scene. He threw down a bill of proportions to make the waiter's eyes glisten, remarked that he had changed his mind and didn't care for lunch, and left the place.

"Baffled again," he muttered as he scanned the crowded street. He made inquiries of a policeman but that worthy man "hadn't seen no young lady in a dark blue suit with yellow flowers at her belt." Two days later Cecil received a tiny package conveying the bead ring, and an incoherent little note begging forgiveness. It was postmarked "New York," so she must have returned, Cecil reflected. That was the only clue the note afforded, for it was neither headed nor signed.

In truth, on the day she had been so nearly discovered, Anne had pleaded so earnestly with her father to return that very night, that he had been forced to yield. Woman-like, she had long ago found out Cecil's name, and when she was again at home her one thought was to close the past forever by returning the ring.

"And this," said poor Anne, as she sealed the package with a tear, "is the end of my one night of folly."

Cecil Granval, strolling in his aunt's garden, close to the crumbling old brick wall, suddenly paused to listen. "I tell each bead unto the

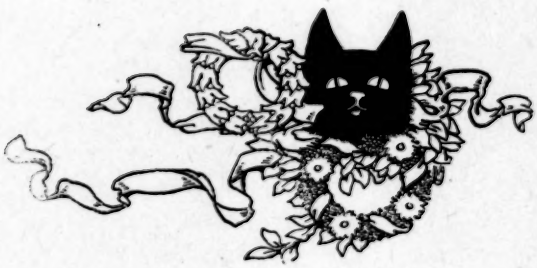
end," a sweet voice sang, "and there a cross is hung." With five steps Granval reached the gardener's ladder and propped it against the wall. In two seconds more he was looking down over the other side—where another ladder stood opposite his own. A girl with gleaming, coppery hair, was swinging idly in a hammock.

"At last! My lady of the moonlight!" As these fervent, low-breathed words reached her ears, Anne raised her eyes, then sprang up, her song halted on her lips.

"Don't run this time, little star o' the summer night," he begged—and Anne didn't. Then he descended the ladder.

"After all, there's no use to waste time in proposing," he observed, coming toward her with outstretched hands, "because I've already proposed—and been accepted. You see, dear, the ladder worked both ways."

"And," sighed Anne, from the depths of her refuge a little later, "my one ball dress wasn't wasted after all."



The Sheriff of Lasco

BY RALPH CUMMINS

IT may have been the stopping of the train that awakened me, but it was a scolding woman's rasping voice that stung me to full consciousness.

"Well, what you stopping for? Come on in! Seems like that brakeman might do something. You kids! Quit that pushing. Look out for that grip! There! I just bet we can't get a seat."

My chance companion, a fat cattle buyer, groaned as he mopped the perspiration.

"This heat is bad enough. Lord! How'll we ever stand that?"

The train toiled on across the desert. I caught a flash of limitless sand and discouraged sagebrush, and a wobbly signboard that marked the location of "Rock Springs."

"There! I knew it. We can't get a seat. Wish we'd went home yesterday. I got enough vacation, you bet."

The nagging voice jarred me into a backward glance. Down the aisle, bending to meet the accelerating motion of the train, reeled an overgrown woman, three dirty small boys, and a little man.

The woman was large; her face had once been of the hatchet variety, but fat had blunted the angles and made of it a bludgeon. She wore a soiled khaki suit and a man's wide Stetson, and carried in her massive hand, a dainty blue vanity box.

The boys, whining and quarreling, stumbled under the feet of the insignificant object in the rear. That final member of the party would have escaped my notice altogether had it not been for the pack-mule load of baggage under which he staggered. For the man was small and lean, with a face and manner so meek and retiring that it required something more than his personality to attract even a passing glance. He blinked his pale blue eyes, and I could almost see the tears of mortification rising in them. I was sorry for the poor old fellow, but as he stopped to pile the sacks and bundles under the seat in front of us, I glimpsed the black grip of a diminutive gun sticking from a holster at his hip. I forgot my sympathy and chuckled; that baby weapon was so out of place in a land of real guns.

My seat mate, the cattle buyer, saw only the unfitness of such a union.

"He's sure some to be pitied." He winced as a fresh outburst, occasioned by some remark of the man, rolled through the car. "I suppose he asked her if he could go to the smoker. And just to think—he might have been a real human being if he hadn't married that."

"What do you suppose they've been doing out here?" I asked.

"Oh, they've been down to the 'Springs' on a vacation." He laughed. "It must have been some recreation for the old man. Lord, it must be

awful to become as useless as that poor devil."

The party settled noisily in the next seat; and we talked, as we had intermittently all day, of this wonderland of sagebrush and big men. This was the buyer's first trip to this territory, but his firm had covered it for years, and he had traveled over much of the surrounding country, so I found him full of desert stories and interesting bits of range history.

"I'm sure looking forward to meeting Rod Lewis. He's Sheriff of Lasco County, and a mighty big man. Got a fine home ranch, and ships more beef than any other six brands. But he got his reputation from cleaning up bad men. They say he's the biggest little fighter in the West, and that a wildcat ain't in it with him when it comes to a hot corner. He's a dead shot, and quick enough and smart enough to get the drop if he has half a show."

"What's the name?" I questioned, as I sensed something familiar in the buyer's recital.

"Rod Lewis. You've surely heard of him."

"Why, yes. Wasn't he the officer who went into the Red Hole country last winter after that bunch of rustlers?"

"You bet; that was Rod. And he took 'em, too. Tackled seven desperadoes all alone. Killed two, wounded another, and brought the whole bunch in."

For a time we tossed back and forth the various daring exploits of the famous Sheriff of Lasco. In my trips across this country, I had heard much of Rod Lewis and the shrewdness of his iron courage. I had come to admire the man who had been able to subdue and make law-abiding, such a hotbed of outlawry as the Lasco Valley, with its wild surrounding mountains and desert.

All at once I realized that the party in front of us had become quiet. The boys dozed; the large, shrewish woman read; the little man, on the inside seat, gazing sleepily at the rocky walls of the dark canyon up which the train was laboring.

Suddenly there stood in the forward door of the coach a large, blue-shirted man, whose face was concealed behind a red handkerchief, and whose hands were active with two monstous six-guns. By the way of gaining attention, he fired several shots into the ceiling.

"Hands up! Everybody! Git 'em up quick! Now the gentleman will pass among you. Be liberal, please."

I now became conscious of a second bandit, who was moving about behind us.

Then my eyes fell upon the little man and, in spite of the danger, I laughed aloud. He had risen to his feet in order to get his hands higher; and his body and hands and very soul were trembling and shaking with fear.

"Oh, we'll all be shot," I heard him moan. "You kin have all I got, Mister. It's in that left-hand pants pocket."

I heard the big woman make some remark that I guessed was along the line of her previous railing, for the poor little coward seemed ready to burst into tears.

"Oh, I don't care. You jest give him that purse, Mary."

The man with the hat deftly abstracted my wallet and possessed himself of my watch. After performing a like service for the profane buyer, he passed on and paused with a grin of derision, beside the next seat.

"Oh, don't shoot, sir. It's right there in that pocket. Mary, give him your purse."

His wife, with a snort, tossed the tiny blue box into the hat. The bandit slipped a fat billbook from the indicated pocket and, certain that his trembling victim was too scared to attempt a holdout, did not search him further.

My eyes followed the collector as he passed down the aisle, until my line of vision was broken by the uplifted hands and drooping head and shoulders of the little man.

For an instant my sight focused upon that cringing example of fear. Yet as I gazed, the little man dropped his hands and sprang, panther-like, into the aisle. He threw himself crouching forward, and the automatic in his right hand spat viciously two tiny spurts of flame.

At the first shot the bandit with the guns drooped, then dashed forward to the floor as if thrust by a powerful blow. His guns clattered under the seats. Even as he fell, a dark stain appeared upon his shirt.

The man with the hat, reaching toward his hip, changed his mind and clutched his shoulder instead, as he collapsed into an awkward heap.

Instantly I caught the significance of the feigned cowardice that had saved that deadly little gun from discovery until the time was ripe to use it.

After a quick glance at the farther bandit, the little man stuck his gun into its holster; as he did so, I saw his face and wondered how I could have mistaken those steely eyes for blue. Then, in that instant before the clamor broke, the woman's irritating voice roared out, and as the little man turned toward her, I caught the gleam, upon his shirt pocket, of a heavy silver star.

"Say, you! Come here and help quiet these kids. Anyone 'ud think you'd never shot a holdup before. Come on! Do you hear me, Rod Lewis?"

James Edward Helps

BY CLIFTON HAVEN

HE was afraid! Afraid!

An average man, looking at the six feet of well-knit manhood which made up Tom Blake, and looking into the wide apart blue-gray eyes, might have wondered of what in the world Tom Blake could be afraid. To tell one kind of truth, he was afraid of a dragon. Of course, to most of our citizens, the dragon was only Auto-Combination A, the latest piece of apparatus acquired by the fire department. In the daytime it does not look much like a dragon, but at night, if one happens to be opposite the Central Fire Station when the machine is called out to a blaze, little imagination is needed to construct such a creature. A sudden illumination of the house tells of the imminent alarm. In half a second the great gong clangs and the ceiling drops a shower of men; the doors open; a hoarse chug-chug-chug, a volley of explosions, and the dragon leaves its fire-house cavern; its four flashing eyes penetrate the darkness for half a mile; smoke pours from sputtering vitals, while a diabolical siren screams a warning so menacing that, when the gloom of night has hidden the monster from one's eyes, the repeated shrieks seem not so much a command to clear the streets as a threat and a defiance to its terrible enemy—fire!

Tom Blake's dragon was with him day and night, however; even on his one day off in five, it followed him like a troubled conscience. He hated the glittering red thing. For five years before its purchase he had been No. 1 driver of the horse-drawn chemical, and his pair of bays had sped to all parts of the city without an accident. But the day of horse-drawn apparatus was dying—the motor had come to stay. He was now No. 1 chauffeur of the Auto-Combination, but how long he would be was a question. With the first fire after the departure of the manufacturer's instructor, he had lost control in taking a sharp corner and run into a post. The damage had not been great, but the delay was considerable, and Combination A was last, instead of first, at the fire.

The chief said little this time, knowing of Tom's ability and appreciating the difficult turn with an unfamiliar vehicle, but when, after a fortnight of too-careful driving, the automobile crashed through a fence and over an embankment, spending the night under an apple tree and four days in the repair shop, he was obliged to tell Blake that unless his driving improved remarkably and quickly, he would have to depose him, not only as No. 1 chauffeur, but as No. 2, 3, or 4—in short, after years of faithful work, his reputation as a capable, daring fireman, would be dealt a heavy blow and his chances of promotion to

a lieutenancy sent a-glimmering. The chief was not unkind, but business was business, efficiency, efficiency, and so it was that Tom Blake, at one o'clock of a hot June afternoon, was mightily despondent. He half sat, half reclined, in a chair on the shady side of the fire station; his thoughts were distinctly morose and the prospect of the summons to the steering-wheel, which might come at any moment, brought him to the *qui vive* of dismay. The fact that Lincoln Avenue, the main route to a large section of the city, was torn up on one side for a quarter of a mile, thus doubly increasing the difficulty of driving, obsessed his mind. His nerve was going fast.

And there was a girl to worry about, too. He ground his teeth at the thought of impending disgrace and the effect it might have on Ellen Brown. And he recalled, with clenching fists, the sneer of Ed Morrison, No. 2 chauffeur, when he remarked with a mean grin that morning, "Watcha gonna run into next, Tom? You'll kill the whole bunch if you don't watch out." It was not a remark that he could well resent, as Ed was one of the half-dozen men who had, by the best of fortune, escaped injury the week before, but it rankled nevertheless, for he knew that Ed was in line for No. 1 and that he had been of late a rather frequent caller at Ellen Brown's home. When Tom had spoken of these calls, Ellen had laughed lightly, as if Mr. Morrison's attentions were amusing.

Tom grew bluer and bluer. Of course Ellen could not possibly care for Ed Morrison. Why, the man was dissipated and not at all Ellen's kind. Still—

"Hello, Mr. Blake," said James Edward.

Tom gloomily eyed the figure before him. James Edward was a small boy for his nine years, but he had a mischievous face and a winning smile. A polite little fellow, bright as a dollar, and always ready to run an errand, of the many youngsters living near the station, he was the favorite of the men.

"Hello! Mr. Blake! What's the matter, sleepy?"

Tom pulled himself together.

"Hello, James Edward Perkins. No, I'm not sleepy."

"Kinder thought you was—got any candy?"

Tom winked mysteriously.

"Well, have yer?"

"The truth is, James Edward, all the candy stores are closed today, so I couldn't get any."

"They ain't either," contradicted James Edward, indignantly. "They're all open 'cause I noticed."

"You have marvelous powers of observation, James. I'm surprised, but if you'll wait here a minute I may be able to find something for you in my locker."

"I knew you had some, Mr. Blake; you always do—almost always," and the pleased James Edward skipped around the door with delight. Old Captain Dalton made a grab for the boy, caught hold of his blouse and corralled him. "Don't you know, young man, that candy will eat away your insides?"

"I don't care," laughed the kid. "The physiology says chewin' to-

backer 'll kill yer, too, but you've lived a good many years."

"Right you are, James," chuckled the captain. "It's a terrible thing. I guess you'd do well to stick to your own pet vice."

"Go on, you're stringin' me—there's Mr. Blake." He squirmed out of the captain's grasp as Tom appeared, and was soon munching a peppermint.

"Can I go in and look at the auto?" he inquired, presently.

"You certainly can," replied Tom, "if I go in with you. Haven't you seen enough of it? I have," he muttered under his breath.

"Well, I know most every engine in the city, but this is new. Ain't it great!" exclaimed James Edward, enthusiastically, as they stood before the huge machine. The Auto-Combination surely was impressive with its shining varnish, polished brass work, resplendent chemical tanks and business-like extension ladder. Its six ton bulk seemed to crouch on the cement floor alert for any call.

"Oh, it must be elegant to run it. Don't you love to?" continued the child.

"Sure I do," lied Tom, groaning inwardly.

"Say, what's the matter with you lately, Mr. Blake? You used to laugh and fool all the time, but you don't say hardly a word to a feller now. Do you mind the heat?" asked James, with youthful concern.

"No, the heat don't bother me," replied Tom, glumly. Even James Edward recognized a change in him! He had not realized that his feelings were showing so plainly—he must get hold of himself.

"Well, what is the matter, then?"

"Nothing's the matter, James Edward."

"I know there is," said the youngster, wisely. "Why don't you tell me about it? I could help yer. Ma says I help her lots of times."

Tom smiled despite his mood.

"No, James," he said, "if anything was the matter, you couldn't possibly help me."

"I betcher I could. I know I could," declared James, unabashed. "Besides, I like you, Mr. Blake."

"You're a good boy," returned Tom, touched by the child's loyalty, "but you're overconfident. Hadn't you better hurry to school? It's getting late."

"Gee, that's right. Say, I saw you talking to Miss Brown the other night. She's my teacher."

"I know it," said Tom.

"Yes, and I told her I knew you and she asked me a lot of things about you."

"She did?" questioned Tom, eagerly, his heart thumping. "What did she ask?"

"Oh, lots. I told her you gave me candy and stuff, and she said that was nice. Say, I've got to run now—thank you for the peppermints, Mr. Blake."

And James Edward was on his way in a jiffy.

Tom followed, but paused in the doorway. The air was close and heavy, with no vestige of a breeze; the leaves on the elm across the street drooped languidly. The other firemen, their chairs tilted back against the wall, were trying to obtain a little comfort in the shade it afforded.

Blake looked the group over. Truly, they were a fine lot of men. Most of them would be sorry if Tom had further trouble. He felt sick at heart as the possibility came back to mind, but recalling what James Edward had said about Ellen, he was cheered a bit and resumed his seat.

"Well, the kid did help me at that," he mused. "Ellen must be interested or she wouldn't ask about me."

The afternoon wore on, but conversation was light—it was almost too hot to talk.

"School closes next week," observed Captain Dalton.

"Yes, sir. Next Thursday they—"

"CLANG!"

The scene changes—presto! Chairs drop to the sidewalk and a dozen men crowd through the firehouse door. Tom leaps to his seat on the Combination. Dreading the ordeal, he waits for the box number. Three times the gong strikes. That means torn-up Lincoln Avenue; of course it has to be a three!

"CLANG! CLANG!"

"Thirty-two! Thirty-two!" shouts the man at the indicator.

"Thirty two!" The Parker school's private box! Tom is electrified. The Parker school—with Ellen Brown—James Edward—with twelve hundred little children! To every man comes a frightful vision: the children! panic, disaster! horror! The veterans of uncounted fires, nevertheless every face sets with apprehension and with determination! The horses on the ladder truck are snapped into harness as never before. The chief's wagon makes the turn from house to street on two wheels as he cries, "Get there, boys, get there!" Blake's powerful machine, covered with men scrambling into rubber hats and coats, shoots from the station. The exhaust is deafening; the jangling bell adds to the din, while above all other sounds the wailing siren's ceaseless blast rents the air.

In a second Tom rounds the corner into Lincoln Avenue—on goes the high speed! Thank God, for two hundred yards all is clear. An ice-cart lumbers to one side. Swish! the great automobile passes in a stifling cloud of dust. The chief is left far behind. The torn-up portion of the avenue looms ahead—for a quarter of a mile the road is only half-width. Tom's nerves are at highest tension, but his arms are like iron, his hands grip the wheel—every faculty is on the job. Coming toward him is a trolley-car; directly ahead several pavers stand as if hypnotized. Astounded at their peril, with husky yells to their mates along the excavation, they fling aside their tools and jump to safety.

People on the sidewalks involuntarily draw back into yards and doorways. The motorman of the trolley stops his car with a jerk and stares petrified at the oncoming monster. One terrifying moment—the fire-auto thunders through the narrow space between the car and curbstone with but inches to spare. Ten seconds more and the full width of the avenue again is available; a single known danger remains: Engine 4, from the house nearest the fire, is due at the corner of Oak Street, a block ahead. Tom thinks like lightning; he must take the chance. Oak Street! The

straining black horses of Engine 4 swing into sight. Whiz! the heavy machine tears by their distended nostrils like a hurricane, crosses Franklin Square at seventy miles an hour, mounts the incline leading to the school and plunges through the archway to the main door, fetching up with screeching brakes and locked wheels. There is no sign of fire, but a chemical line is quickly run into the hall. A minute, and three smoking engines race up the street outside, while from the building hundreds of wondering eyes look forth.

"Well, it can't be much," thinks Tom, waiting for orders.

An elderly man, the school principal, comes out on the steps, talking excitedly to the chief. The latter brusquely waves his men back. "False alarm! False alarm!" The cry is taken up. Gongs clang, horses back and fill, and once more the street is empty as the apparatus returns to quarters.

As Tom resumed his seat he did not fail to catch the beautiful smile which Ellen Brown gave him from an open window. Something about it was gloriously significant and his heart bounded with happiness.

Captain Dalton was on the sidewalk talking with the chief, whose wagon was not to be seen. Tom heard the captain say, "We were certainly climbing!" as the two men jumped aboard the Combination.

"Blake," said the chief, "the department broke all records, responding to that alarm, but you broke the record of records. I never saw anything travel so fast in my life. And a regular steeplechase most of the way. However did you do it?"

"I had to do it, Chief," said Tom.

"Well, you've got the hang of the buzz-cart now all right and I'm mighty glad for you. How about it?"

"I could take her anywhere on earth," answered Tom confidently.

The dragon had lost its terror; no longer was the No. 1 chauffeur a novice. The hands on the wheel were as steady as the heart within the man, for in a supreme emergency Tom Blake had found himself.

Just as Tom left the house for supper that evening, a forlorn shape crept up beside him. "You won't let them send me away, will you, Mr. Blake?" it said.

"Send you away? What do you mean? Why, what's the matter with you, James Edward?" asked Tom, in surprise, as he recognized the shrinking figure.

"Some of the fellers said I'd be sent to the reform school," replied James Edward, with a sob.

"Reform school! What for?"

"I pulled the false alarm this afternoon," said James.

"You did? Why, how in the world—"

"It was just as we was goin' in from recess, an' we'd been playing stump the leader—an' Johnnie Morse stumped me to pull the hook—an' I did. The principal was awful mad."

Tom took him by the collar.

"Oh, don't, Mr. Blake—I'm awful sorry—what yer goin' to do?"

"I'm going to keep you out of the reform school for one thing, James Edward," declared Tom, "and for another, I'm going to buy you the biggest plate of ice cream in town!"

Ethereal Effects

BY RUTH HENDERSON

HAOS! Chaos! Chaos! Imperishable, impenetrable, never-ending chaos! Not an eye to see, not an ear to hear, not a spirit to help! Ah! Not a soul to befriend it on this lonely journey: the last triumph—or defeat—of the human soul. Oh! the anguish, the uncertainty, the incessant battling of it!

So—this was the Valley of the shadow of Death.

Will not someone heed the pitiful cries of this despairing heart? Will not someone give it rest and peace? Will not someone free it from this eternal suffocation that seems always killing it—and yet never kills?

"Nay! Not yet awhile. Pay the penalty of your sins on earth. Pay! Pay! Pay!" And a door opened out of the chaos: a door of indescribable vastness, leading on to a still vaster domain. Here was another soul: a mistlike being in drab grey, formless, elusive—but yet a soul.

The Lonely One sprang forward with a cry of joy and passed into the infinite domain. But it was not the abode of joy. The solemn, booming voice of the Grey Mist, announcing the arrival of a new soul, brought only hopeless pity to the faces of the innumerable other weary souls. Yes, there were others; so many, many others, that it was beyond the power of man or angles to count them.

The Lonely One could not understand. On every side, he searched hungrily for a friendly face, a welcoming smile. But there was none. There was only misery, unutterable misery: the misery of hopelessness.

From the distance, a figure approached: a familiar figure. It was the earthly chum of the Lonely One. Surely he would find welcome here! But no! Only ultimate horror shone in his comrade's face; inevitable horror and damning accusation.

No question was permitted to pass the Lonely One's lips. Before he could utter a word, the other had launched forth into a torrent of abuse and condemnation.

"You sent me here! You! You! You!" he laughed harshly. "Now pay for it. Pay, yes, pay! You it was who taught me the witchery of the gaming table, that sent me to a 'gentleman' gambler's ruin. You it was who first tempted me with the seductive wine that hurled me at last into a 'gentleman' drunkard's grave—*you* it was who dragged my reluctant feet onward to the pitfall of eternal destruction: YOU. And now you must pay the greater penalty, because you were stronger than I; *you* resisted the earthly torment. But it is useless to fight against the punishment that has come upon you for pulling me down. Do you know where you are? You are in the domain of a twelve-thousand years' cycle. Yes! And there is only one way out; and that I

will not tell you. Your punishment has come; only *you* can extricate yourself from the crucible of torture. If you go round this cycle twelve thousand times twelve thousand years, I will never, never tell you!" The last words ended in a hoarse rattle, and the miserable wretch turned and vanished.

Not a vestige of hope was left to the Lonely One. All about him was the blackness of despair. He started out desperately and determinedly on his unending journey. But all at once he slackened his pace. It was as though a heavy burden were gradually beginning to crush upon his shoulders, ever growing heavier and heavier, weighting and pressing him down, down.

Eons and eons of old men and old women stumbled their way along, aged by the endless years of searching for the escape always just beyond, eluding them. All of them were travelling the same direction. None were allowed to turn back; none were permitted to stop or rest. They were cursed with the penalty of perpetual motion.

The Lonely One had twice passed around the cycle of twelve thousand years—twice! He had been continually moving on and on in a grey mist of maddening sameness for twenty-four thousand years. Many times he had passed and re-passed his comrade, receiving always the same vituperation, the same jeers and bitter abuse.

Long since, the Lonely One had learned that could he but find the path of escape for himself, he would thereby free also, his friend. But how helpless, how hopeless he was: he knew not even for what to search!

He was starting on his weary round for the third time, and once more he encountered the old chum. He would have passed on had not the latter stayed him.

"I never intended telling you how you might escape. I had hoped to find the way myself and leave you here to suffer everlasting retribution. But I have traversed this cycle five times and have not yet succeeded in discovering a way out. You must free us both. You must!"

The Lonely One threw back his head. A firm resolve spoke in his words. "Only give me the chance—show me the way—and I will do my utmost to liberate you from this horror, even if I must remain—always."

And his comrade replied: "It is all so hopeless, even after one knows *what* to search for." He sighed. "Somewhere in this cycle, there is a ray of light, very, very tiny—shining through a niche in the invisible wall. No one can guess how far this wall is, and it is only a matter of chance if you ever get near enough to so much as catch a glimpse of this infinitesimal ray—and follow it. But if you once see the ray and pursue its path, it will burst into an enormous sun, from which a host of angels will fly and lift us out of our misery."

The Lonely One bowed, thanked him, and went on his weary way. It indeed seemed an impossible thing to happen, but he resolutely put all doubt from his mind and firmly determined to find the light.

On and still on he wandered, grow-

ing more and more hopeless and downcast in spirit. But despite the heavy pressure, he never lowered his head nor bent his shoulders, walking always erect and alert.

And then, suddenly, about half way around the cycle, It appeared, faint and elusive, now trickling forth vaguely, now gone. But ever and ever he pursued It: this fantastic ray of light, teasing, vanishing, reappearing. But however futile seemed the task, he still remained firm in his resolve to follow It.

And now it seemed never to leave him! It shone in a clear, steady beam. Turning abruptly, he was amazed to find his chum by his side. Tranquil joy and unutterable peace were written on his face. The old accusing look was gone, leaving the light of forgiveness in its place. And suddenly the ray burst; burst in a dazzling, blinding flood of light; yea, more than light—gold and silver and diamonds melted together in a million shining colors and flooded them with indescribable brilliance. And out of it all, a mighty host of angels flew! Pure white, save for the wreaths of blood-red rubies crowning their heads and but emphasizing their purity.

The man on the operating table stirred and opened his eyes. He uttered a cry of joy and sank back into unconsciousness again. Later, on the snow-white bed of the immaculate hospital-room, the man told me his strange experience under the influence of ether, just as I have told it to you.

"And strange to say," he finished sadly, turning his face to the wall, "my college chum—is dead."

In the Clutches of Reelism

BY RALPH L. HENRY

COBERLY lowered his revolver a little and peered into the darkness. The moonlight streaming through the window glinted along the steel barrel of his weapon. On the far side of the room, in the shadow, something stirred. Coberly shifted his automatic to his left hand and groped under his pillow for his flashlight. But before he secured it, the room was flooded with light. Someone had turned on the electric circuit. A voice spoke from across the bed behind him, and Coberly turned to face a Colt derringer within three feet of his head. There was a queer clicking sound audible in the room. The words of the visitor seemed to pierce Coberly's ears with metallic clearness:

"You'll be kind enough to drop your gun, Mr. Coberly. Ah, thank you. Now we can talk. Armed neutrality is preferable to open hostilities any day."

Coberly dropped his gun on the bed and stood up. In his right hand he clutched the flashlight. His eyes, becoming accustomed to the glare of the lights, saw across the bed a stranger, faultlessly attired in evening dress and carrying his hat and cane in his left hand. His right was returning the derringer to his pocket. Coberly noted this in particular. In view of possible future developments it was well to know where his visitor carried his gun. For a full minute the two men looked at each other. The intruder broke the silence in a tone of evident surprise.

"You don't appear to know me, Mr. Coberly."

"No, I don't. Who the devil are you—and what do you mean by breaking into my house at this hour?"

"Your pardon, Mr. Coberly. I did not break into your house. I entered by the front door."

"That's a lie. It's always locked."

"And for every lock there is a key. Is it not so? Here is yours." The stranger leaned across the bed and dropped a key into Coberly's hand. The latter eyed it closely. There could be no mistake. It was his latchkey. Coberly looked at his visitor. The stranger was not watching him. He was busy lighting a cigarette. As he fumbled for a match, Coberly stealthily reached for his revolver. His fingers closed on the butt as the other applied the flame to his Fatima. The moment for action had come. Coberly whipped up his weapon and covered the stranger with a remarkably steady hand. Still the other did not seem to notice the movement. He flicked the burnt match into the tray, and then as he lifted his eyes, seemingly for the first time, saw Coberly's offensive maneuver.

A slow smile crept over his lips. He leaned forward and blew a mouthful of smoke directly into the muzzle

of the weapon. Coberly was too much taken back to speak. His arm dropped to his side. For a moment there was silence in the room. Again the strange clicking noise, as of someone winding a huge clock, was to be heard. Coberly listened eagerly for a second. The noise seemed to come from back of the mantle-piece. The stranger spoke, however, before he had been able to locate it. The calm, suave tone was very much in contrast with the warlike turn affairs had taken.

"It's always necessary, Mr. Coberly, to have cartridges in order to enjoy the full usefulness of a weapon like yours."

With an oath Coberly tore open the magazine. Every chamber was empty. Was his eyesight going. He had loaded it himself only the evening before, when he had finished target shooting. He eyed his guest with a mingled expression of bewilderment and fear. Then he spoke, his fingers nervously fumbling with the empty revolver.

"What do want with me? And who—who are you, anyway?" Coberly still stood at the head of the bed clad in his pajamas. He was shivering.

The stranger laid his hat and cane on a chair and removed his gloves. He paused at the table to dust the ash from his cigarette.

"The evening is cold, Mr. Coberly. Allow me." He held out Coberly's bath robe which had been lying over the foot of the bed. Without protest, the shivering host allowed himself to be enfolded in his own garment. After a moment's rummaging in the closet, the stranger emerged with a pair of knit slippers. Coberly slipped his feet into them. He was beginning to enjoy himself. This fellow was a far better valet than that ass, Thompkins—perhaps—but just at this juncture the supposed valet began to speak again.

"You must be made comfortable, or else we can't get down to business." As he spoke, he drew a Morris chair up to the table and pushed Coberly gently into it. He took his seat directly opposite. The light was just above them over the middle of the table.

The stranger turned in his seat and laid the butt of his cigarette on the tray. He held out a silver case to his host. "Smoke?" Coberly shook his head. He was getting worried again. What was the fellow driving at? The stranger took a cigarette; lighted it, and looked casually at his watch.

"It is now 1.30. Half an hour will do. I won't keep you longer than that."

"But what's all this foolishness mean, anyway? I'm getting sorta peevish. Spring your trap. Let's have it."

The man on the other side of the table blew a column of smoke high into the air, and followed it with a series of fantastic rings, circling one above the other. Coberly gnawed his lips nervously. Damn the deliberation of him. Why didn't he spring his game. In the next room a clock struck 1.30. It seemed to Coberly that the clock was ticking very loudly, and at a very rapid rate, as if some one were winding it. Would it never cease? It seemed to be right under the mantle-piece. Or was his nerve going? Just then, the stranger leaned

across the table and spoke in a low, tense voice. His eyes were glinting wickedly. His right hand was in his coat pocket.

"Mr. Coberly, I'm a desperate man. You can help me and not harm yourself. You have in your possession the bonds of the Realty Stock Commission. I want those bonds, Mr. Coberly. And more than that, I'm going to have 'em." The derringer swung menacingly across the table.

Coberly's face paled, but he was game once he knew against what he was fighting. His teeth clinched in a determined grip.

"Well, you'll not get 'em," he snarled.

The stranger's slow, quizzical smile played for an instant on his lips. "See here, Mr. Coberly. These papers might interest you." He held a document up under the light just out of Coberly's reach. In one corner was a huge red seal. The financier recognized it. It was the official seal of the Realty Stock Commission. And the villain already had it—was holding it for ransom, no doubt. Coberly's mind worked fast. There was but one thing to do. Pay ransom he could not. His whole fortune was tied up in those bonds. Their loss would ruin him. There was a fighting chance, and Coberly took it. Over the table he leaped with surprising agility. But quick as he was, the stranger was quicker. As Coberly leaped, the other man bounded from his chair. When Coberly landed on the cushions of the Morris chair, the stranger was already at the door, As he scrambled to his feet, the thief raised his revolver and took deliberate aim. With a crash the chandelier fell into a thousand pieces. The room was thrust into absolute darkness. Desperately Coberly struggled to the door. It was already locked. The fellow had foiled him again. There was a light in the hallway. He heard subdued voices, then a sound as of someone dragging a heavy object out of the next room and down the stairs. Then silence. For ten minutes he waited at the keyhole, listening intently. Finally a step sounded in the hallway outside.

"Is that you, Thompkins? Let me out, quick. I've been robbed and locked in my room. Let me out."

It was not the voice of his valet however, which Coberly heard through the keyhole. In suave tones, which the prisoner could not help but recognize, the visitor spoke:

"I am returning your Realty Commission Bonds, Mr. Coberly. We are all through with them. Thank you kindly—and good night." Coberly heard the key turn in the lock. He threw his weight against the door and it flew open. At his feet lay a packet of papers. He snatched them up. A glance showed him that they were his lost bonds. Hurriedly he leaved them over. They were all intact. He ran to the head of the stairs; no one was in sight. The marauder had made good his escape.

Coberly returned to his room in deep thought. As he opened the door, something glittered in the moonlight at his feet. He stooped over and picked up his flashlight. By its light he carefully secured the bonds in the safe. This done, he hesitated a moment, standing irresolute by the

table, over which he had so nimbly vaulted a few minutes before. The hall clock chimed two. Coberly yawned.

"Shucks. The bonds are all right. He's miles away by now. I may as well sleep on it." Brushing the fragments of the broken chandelier from the coverlet, he crept between the sheets. At 2.30 Coberly snored peacefully.

At nine o'clock the next morning, Vincent Coberly rose and rang for his valet.

"Thompkins, bring my clothes into the next room and clean up this mess."

"Yes, sir." Thompkins always said "Yes, sir," in just that selfsame way. It irritated Coberly—especially this morning.

"Don't stand there braying at me like a confounded ass. Get busy."

"Yes, sir," and Thompkins departed in the direction of the kitchen in search of the dustpan.

Coberly breakfasted alone. His mind was full of his adventure of the night before. It couldn't have been a dream, he reflected, for there was the broken chandelier. And there were the bonds in the safe, when he was very positive that he had placed them in his desk the night before. He was still pondering over the enigma when Thompkins brought in the mail.

"Thompkins, did you hear any noise in the house last night—about half past one?"

"No, sir. I didn't, sir. You recall I spent the night at me brother's. His son ain't expected to live."

"Oh, yes. Well—give me my mail. Don't hang on to it as if you had glue on your fingers," snapped Coberly.

"Yes, sir," murmured Thompkins as he noiselessly withdrew.

Coberly casually noted that wheat had fallen a notch, and was about to open a letter from his New York bankers, when his eye fell on a long envelope bearing the return address of the Kalen Moving Picture Company. He tore open the envelope and shook it vigorously. Three pieces of paper fell out upon the table. He seized the yellow slip. It was a check from the Kalen Motion Picture Company for $50 made out to himself. He snatched up the blue slip. Would wonders never cease? It, too, was a check—this time for $1000, payable to Vincent Coberly, and bearing the signature of the same company as the other. What did it mean? Why did this company, of which he had only heard indirectly, owe him $1,050. He seized the third paper and read:

"Dear Mr. Coberly:—

We are enclosing a check for $1000 for your services last night. It was necessary to get some truly realistic pictures to fit into our latest scenario, *The Stolen Bonds*. You furnished just the effect we wanted. Your presentation will outclass any of the rehearsed parts of our drama. It will be a tremendous hit because it was the real thing. Realistic pictures are what have made the Kalen Company the success it is today.

We regret exceedingly that we were forced to corrupt your valet in order to get the keys, and to smuggle our machine into your house, and into the next room where we could get all the action which took place. Your valet is also responsible for the unloaded state of your revolver. For this in addition, we crave your pardon.

We are also enclosing a check for $50, which, I trust, will cover the expense of the chandelier, and of the hole which we were forced to cut in your wall in order to get our machine properly focused. You will find it just below the mantle.

The first reel of *The Stolen Bonds* will be given at our 14th Street Playhouse on

April 20. Call and get a season pass.

Again thanking you for your great kindness, and with the hope that my next visit to your home will be of a more peaceful nature, I remain,

Yours in the interest of the realistic drama,

Victor Woodruff,
Sec. K. M. P. Co.

Vincent Coberly swore softly to himself, as he laid down the letter. There was a twinkle in his eyes, however. His sense of humor saved him.

"I've heard of compulsory education, and conscripted sailors, but I never heard of a private citizen being forcibly dragged before the public eye as a motion picture actor. And then to make my debut in a pair of silk pajamas. Oh, piffle! *The Stolen Bonds*, Vincent Coberly—leading. It's rich."

He folded the letter and eyed the checks with a comical twist on his lips. "Come in handy, you boys will," he said, as he placed them in his bank book. Then a thought struck him, and three seconds later he tapped the bell.

Thompkins appeared in the doorway clad in his overcoat, as if about to go. Coberly spoke slowly and evenly, but with a tinge of irony.

"Thompkins, I received a letter from the Kalen Motion Picture Company this morning, which gives me a little deeper insight into your character. In short, you're fired."

"Yes, sir," and Thompkins turned to go. Suddenly he halted and fished out of his pocket a slip of blue paper. His eyes twinkled as he held it up for his former master to read. Coberly's eyes dilated as he gained the full significance of the missive.

"Pay to the order of Jonas Thompkins the sum of $500.
Kalen Motion Picture Company."

The valet took the paper from Coberly's fingers; folded it, and returned it to his pocket.

"Mr. Coberly, I'm satisfied—are you?"

Coberly nodded grimly. In spite of himself he smiled.

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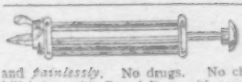

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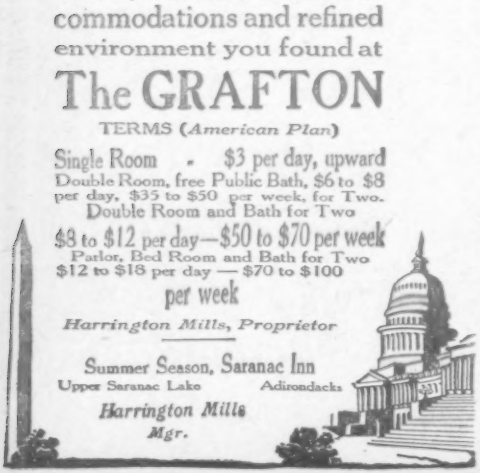

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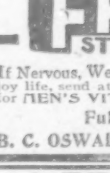

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